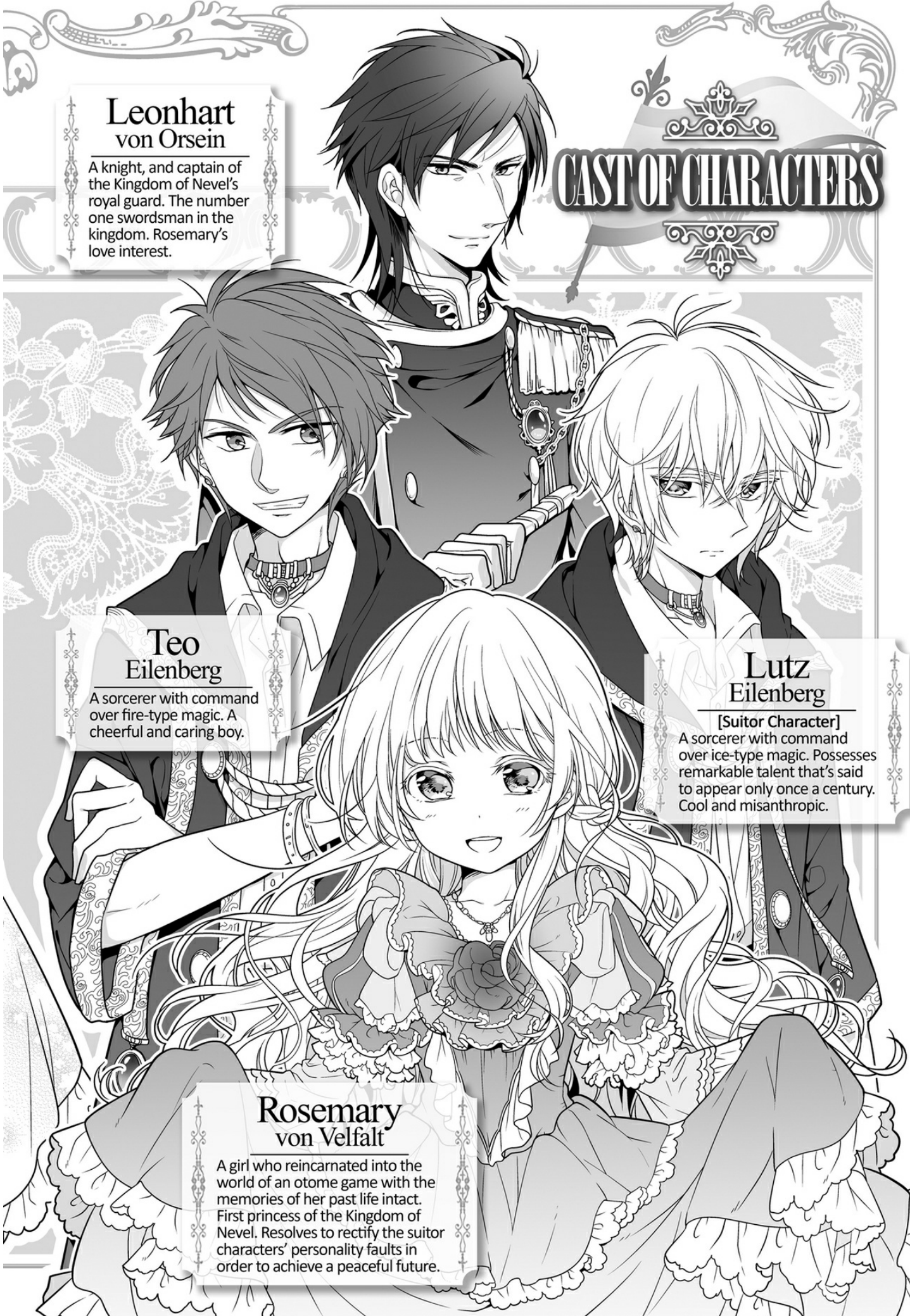


THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING STORY ROUTES

Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

1





Leonhart von Orsein

A knight, and captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard. The number one swordsman in the kingdom. Rosemary's love interest.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Teo Eilenberg

A sorcerer with command over fire-type magic. A cheerful and caring boy.

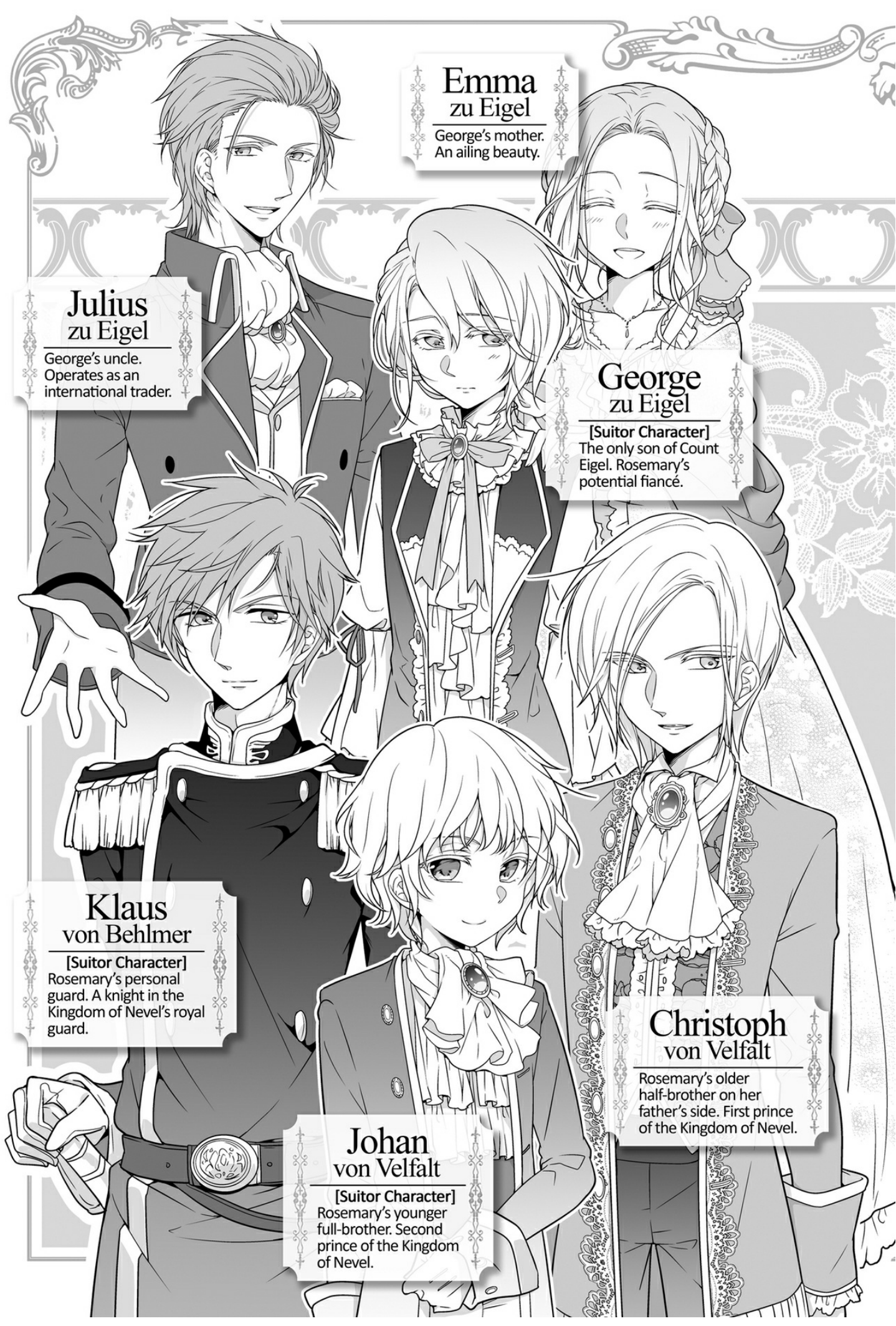
Lutz Eilenberg

[Suitor Character]

A sorcerer with command over ice-type magic. Possesses remarkable talent that's said to appear only once a century. Cool and misanthropic.

Rosemary von Velfalt

A girl who reincarnated into the world of an otome game with the memories of her past life intact. First princess of the Kingdom of Nevel. Resolves to rectify the suitor characters' personality faults in order to achieve a peaceful future.



Emma zu Eigel

George's mother.
An ailing beauty.

Julius zu Eigel

George's uncle.
Operates as an
international trader.

George zu Eigel

[Suitor Character]
The only son of Count
Eigel. Rosemary's
potential fiancé.

Klaus von Behlmer

[Suitor Character]
Rosemary's personal
guard. A knight in the
Kingdom of Nevel's royal
guard.

Johan von Velfalt

[Suitor Character]
Rosemary's younger
full-brother. Second
prince of the Kingdom
of Nevel.

Christoph von Velfalt

Rosemary's older
half-brother on her
father's side. First prince
of the Kingdom of Nevel.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Cast of Characters](#)

[Monologue of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[Brothers of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Valiant Struggle of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[A Shock for the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[Monologue of the First Prince](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess Practices Avoidance](#)

[The Distress of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Sentimentality of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Determination of the Second Prince](#)

[The Determination of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess Works Hard](#)

[The Sorcerers' Chitchat](#)

[The Strenuous Effort of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Apprehension of the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[Conflict for the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess in Crisis](#)

[Remorse Strikes the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Sorcerers' Struggle](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess Suffers Anguish](#)

[The Return of the Sorcerers](#)

[Apology from the Princess](#)

[Side Story: The Reincarnated Princess and Her Sweets](#)

[Character Designs](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Monologue of the Reincarnated Princess I, Rosemary von Velfalt, was reborn as the first princess of the kingdom of Nevel. Though I began a new life, for some reason, I retained the memories of my previous self.

Basically, I'm an otherworld protagonist. Strange, but true.

The world into which I was reborn was vast and unfamiliar. It spanned an entire large continent, which was shaped like a bird's wing, and beyond the mainland were hundreds of islands, both large and small.

My kingdom was located on the continent, in the southern portion of the central region. Nevel was a monarchical state, backed by a thousand years of history, and was the second-largest nation on the continent.

Nevel's southeastern region was blessed with bountiful flatlands and a temperate climate. Agriculture thrived there, and the region boasted some of the largest harvests of wheat and corn in the world. The mountainous north was also rich in resources; it was home to the mining industry, where many workers earned their livelihoods from the iron ore deposits found there.

A trade route cut across the central heartlands of Nevel, connecting the nation of Vint to the west with the Kingdom of Grundt to the east. Dotted along this road were booming merchant towns.

Though primarily famed as a grand and prosperous kingdom, Nevel was held in high regard by other countries for another, odd reason—though it was rare, children with magical abilities were occasionally born in Nevel. This meant that, in Nevel alone, there existed a class of sorcerers.

Some claimed that the source of this magic was a demon lord who had long ago forced the world to the brink of destruction, and who now lay sealed beneath Nevel's ground. Others suggested that Nevel's millennium of uninterrupted existence was the cause—they believed that the earliest

generations had passed the secret of magical power down through the centuries. Though theories abounded, the true reason remained unknown. To most, the demon lord was just a character from fairy tales, and few believed that he actually existed.

I was one of those few. To be more specific, I didn't believe, I *knew*. I knew that magic and the demon lord existed.

To explain why, I'll have to turn back time a little. As I explained at the outset, I was reborn with the memories of my previous life intact. I'll never forget the shock I felt when, after dying in a traffic accident, I'd opened my eyes and found myself in an infant's body.

What's this, a light novel?! I'd tried to shout as someone resembling a wet nurse picked me up. My infant vocal cords hadn't been strong enough for words though, so my question had come out as a baby's cry.

Despite this confusing start, I grew up quickly, dodging the odd plague here and there, until a different realization rocked my world at three years old. Now literate, I had started to read books and, as I learned the names of my country, my family, and myself, I felt a strange sense of déjà vu. It was possible that I had learned them from the wet nurse and the maids talking, but I wondered why they felt so familiar.

Suddenly, I remembered—that otome game. The details of this world were the same as the one in the game I'd played in my past life.

What's this, a light novel?! I almost exclaimed. This seemed to be a recurring question in my life. However, since prim and proper princesses weren't supposed to make sarcastic remarks, I managed to hold in my outburst.

I prayed for it to be a misunderstanding, but similarity after cruel similarity mounted up. Both countries had the same names and the same worldview. There were young boys whose names and faces were identical to the game's main characters. To top it off, I shared a name with the side character who acted as the heroine's rival. There were too many parallels to shrug the idea off as simple coincidence.

"Well, *great*."

I sighed from my chair by the window, which was located in the corner of my room—a space extravagantly decorated in the style of the European Renaissance. The fog from my breath on the window dissipated and revealed my reflection: a young girl with a vacant expression. My skin was fair, my platinum blond hair flowed in gentle waves, and the upturned corners of my large, sky-blue eyes gave me a stern expression. I possessed all the dazzling beauty you would expect from a rival character, but despite my comely appearance, I wasn't straightforward enough to let vanity put a smile on my face.

A second, longer sigh escaped my lips. Thankfully the nearby maids didn't see or hear me; a sighing three-year-old staring off into the distance would have appeared quite surreal.

Discovering that this world was the one from the otome game hadn't left me jumping for joy. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The reason was simple: that game was famous for being terrible.

I think the title was *Welcome to the Hidden World*. In the story, a high school girl was summoned to another world as a shrine maiden. Her quest was to defeat the demon lord and restore peace, or something like that.

The main plotline was pretty standard, so I didn't have anything to complain about. The problem was the characters. The "hidden world" in the title didn't just refer to the otherworld setting, and it carried a double meaning: all of the main characters had a hidden side, a secret nature. This in and of itself didn't cross any lines, as I don't have any complaints about a rehashed, slightly cliché setup.

No, the big problem was that the suitor characters' hidden sides, the main selling point, were absolutely pathetic.

The second prince was a siskon, and the adoration he felt for his sister bordered on obsession. The noble with a tragic backstory was an unaware narcissist. The personal guard was a self-defeating masochist. The sorcerer was a necrophile. The assassin was gay. Worst of all, the priest, otherwise known as the demon lord and the main villain, was a yandere whose love was expressed through violence. He was so bent on his own destruction that he summoned his

archnemesis, the shrine maiden.

There couldn't be a better example of a game trying too hard to be original and failing. If I'd met any of them in the real world, I would've turned and bolted away at full speed. They weren't the kind of people you'd want to have anything to do with.

When I started the game in my previous life and began winning over the noble, the first glimpses of his narcissistic nature made my heart sink.

The heroine must be an angel, or maybe a qualified defense attorney, to be able to take this dumbass seriously, I thought with a straight face.

I suppressed my initial urge to ask the game shop for a refund, and trudged through to the wedding scene at the end. The noble gazed at the heroine in her pure white dress and remarked, "So beautiful. The reflection of me in your eyes, that is."

I rage-threw my controller onto the floor in disgust at that point.

Is every writer for this game a complete idiot?! Painting a happy ending only to fade to black with a terrifying final line is a format that only works in horror stories. Using a line like that in a romance game makes a mockery of all the character development up to that point.

I tried a different route, and then another. Every single character followed a similar course; there wasn't an ounce of excitement. The suitors weren't lovable so much as stabbable. I felt like a guinea pig being subjected to an avant-garde stress test.

The people on the internet by and large shared my opinions. Even so, there was a distinct reason why we all powered through without throwing the game away: accompanying the outwardly dazzling main characters were the so-called side characters. Their purpose in the game was just to add texture and flesh out the story, but these side characters outshone the main suitors in every conceivable way, and that imbalance was what made *Hidden World* so terrible.

Since they weren't main characters, they never received much screen time with the protagonist. A few of them even went entirely unmentioned in some routes. For whatever reason though, they were all hotties that were good-

looking enough to rival the main characters. Also, unlike the main characters, they had amazing personalities. They were truly faultless.

For example, the first prince was cool and intelligent. The narcissistic noble had a side-character uncle who was a calm and kind gentleman. The guard captain was caring and strong, a man among men. The necrophile sorcerer's rival was zealous and hardworking. The assassin-turned-waiter was a feminist and a friend to all women. Even the priest's sister was a stunning beauty with a big-sisterly disposition.

What's the point in making the side characters so much better than the main characters? If I could've interrogated the production staff about how it had come to this, I would've.

In spite of my frustration with the main characters, the side characters kept me playing. The best among them was the guard captain, who happened to be my number one heartthrob and the man who boasted the top spot on the internet's popularity polls. He left all the main characters in the dust. I suffered through the pain of each disappointing route just to see his smile. However small the chance, I pinned all my hopes on the possibility that, after finishing the main characters' stories, the guard captain route would become available.

Sadly, I couldn't unlock it. Or rather, there was nothing locked away. His route didn't exist.

I fought on through pangs of despair as the gallery filled up and up. *There's got to be at least one hidden character, right?* I thought, trudging onward. But, struggle as I might, neither God nor the production staff led me to the promised land.

Tears fell down my cheeks when I saw the "100%" in the corner of the scene-select screen. No new routes appeared for the side characters, even after finishing the game. All that remained was the fact that I had wasted my time playing through every inch of this piece of shit.

I've never felt so empty. What am I even doing?

I wasn't alone in this feeling. The most well-liked ending, according to the player community, was the normal ending, which also happened to be the one where the despondent heroine snuck back to her own world with all hopes of

world peace and romance shattered. So what made this doom-and-gloom ending so popular? *His* appearance, of course—the guard captain’s.

As the heroine lamented her powerlessness, he gently stroked her hair, saying, “It’s not your fault. Go home, live a happy life.”

Who wouldn’t fall for him?

I lost count of the number of times I screamed “Don’t do it!” at the screen, but the shrine maiden still chose to step into the magic circle, homeward bound and looking guilt-ridden.

I might have gotten a bit carried away with my explanation, but the point is that I was reborn into that shitty game’s world, which could only mean one thing: endless amounts of trouble were right around the corner.

If I was to live a peaceful life in Nevel, I would have to break the event flags to avoid triggering routes where I would end up with any of my suitors. Though the flags were once just checkpoints in a game, they now carried real-world ramifications that could ruin my new life. I needed to dodge them at all costs.

My head hurt just thinking about how I would mollify the six pain-in-the-ass main characters by myself, all without triggering their flags...but there was no other path to happiness.

The three-year-old me said nothing, but I took a deep breath, scrunched up my face, and made up my mind.

I can do this. I can reach a future where I meet my beloved guard captain.

Brothers of the Reincarnated Princess

“Brother, I have a favor to ask.”

As I addressed him, my brother’s ice-blue eyes widened in shock.

He stood in front of a bookcase, which was so large that it dominated the entire west-facing wall of the room. The other walls and the ceiling were adorned with intricate engravings, all done in Renaissance style.

My brother’s features mirrored mine in several ways; his silky, platinum blond hair fell to his collar, and his skin was unblemished alabaster. His eyes were slightly upturned, embellished by long eyelashes, and framed by imposing eyebrows. His facial structure was in accordance with the golden ratio, and this symmetry made his face look as if a master craftsman had sculpted it.

He was slim, as was typical of early adolescent boys, and he wore a justaucorps, a gilet, and culottes, all in blue to match his eyes. His fine clothes were finished off with a detailed pattern of intertwined flowers and ivy, done in silver thread. A topaz brooch fastened a cravat to his collar, and he held a book in his hands, which were both adorned with white gloves.

Every inch of him, down to the smallest detail, just screamed prince. And he was. This boy was my brother, the first prince Christoph von Velfalt.

He stood in shocked silence for a moment, blinking his long eyelashes so heavily that they almost made a sound. His stare was intent but contained a clear look of surprise—a rare departure from his usual disinterested expression. He finally closed the thick book in his hands and placed it on the shelf, then walked over to me, stopping just shy of two meters away.

“It’s unlike you to come and see me of your own accord.”

His phrasing might have sounded insulting, but a peek at his expression revealed that he meant no offense. Truthfully, it *was* rare for me to approach him. In my defense though, I wasn’t avoiding him because I disliked him.

The problem was that Christoph, or Chris for short, was only my half brother. I had a full brother also, the second prince, named Johan. He and I were half-

siblings to Chris, and we only shared our father's bloodline with him. Chris was the son of the king's last wife, who never fully recovered from childbirth and passed away years ago. Johan and I were the children of the king's new wife.

My mother, the current queen, despised Chris. Whenever she thought of the old queen, my mother would fall into fits of jealousy. Chris could never escape her ire because he was a living, breathing reminder of his mother. Needless to say, our mother took great pains to ensure that Johan and I, her natural children, stayed away from Chris as much as possible.

You can act however you want, mother, but forcing your feelings onto your kids is a bit much in my opinion.

Even with all of this supposed passion, our mother only had eyes and a heart for the king. She was barely aware of Johan and me, so it was frustrating that she controlled our interactions with Chris. Why was this the only thing she chose to poke her nose into?

"Won't your mother scold you again for talking to me?" asked Chris.

"I don't mind."

"But..."

"I'm five years old now," I said adamantly. "I'm old enough to take responsibility for my own actions."

"Rose," he started, seeming dumbstruck as he called me by my nickname.

What a wonderful person he is, I thought. He could have shown contempt for me as the daughter of the woman who mistreated him, but he never did. Far from it, he showed consideration instead.

Are you taking notes, Johan? You could learn a thing or two from your older brother.

"I see." Chris stared at me in silence for a moment, then his face mellowed. He said little, but his eyes harbored a gentle look, like a grandfather gazing upon a grandchild who had grown up.

You carry quite the presence for an eight-year-old, brother.

"So, what's the favor?" Chris asked, bringing the conversation back to the

main point without prying any further.

“The truth is, it’s about Johan...” My words trailed off.

“Johan? What’s the matter with him?”

Oh brother, I thought. You got all day?

Out loud, I said, “I’d like you to find strict, smart teachers for Johan.”

At this request, Chris fell silent.

Our youngest brother, Johan von Velfalt, was the second prince of the Kingdom of Nevel, one of *Hidden World’s* main characters, and, to top it all off, a bona fide siscon.

In the game, the only person he truly loved was his older sister, Rosemary. She was also the only person he trusted with all of his heart. If she said yes, so did he; if she said no, then no it was. If she pointed to a dark-black crow and called it white, he would swear it was white in a heartbeat. His feelings of love towards his sister were obsessive, to say the least.

But it wasn’t really his fault. Why did he turn out that way? The answer lay entirely in his upbringing.

As our father busied himself with matters of state, he paid no attention to his family. Our mother was, as I explained before, only interested in the king, except for small incursions where she would stifle her children’s actions. The lack of attention from his parents left Johan feeling trapped, as if he lived in a tiny bubble.

The maids assumed from his outward similarity to our proud, high-strung mother that he would take after her in temperament as well, so they kept him at arm’s length, afraid to poke that hornet’s nest.

Additionally, every teacher assigned to him owed their status to his mother, so they let him do as he pleased, probably fearing social and political retribution from the queen if they dared to discipline him.

Amid all of that isolation, only his sister Rosemary dealt with him head-on.

So yeah, it makes perfect sense that he’d start to depend on her.

When playing *Hidden World* in my previous life, I was more ambivalent about Johan's problems. Of course, that mindset was only available to me because he had been Rosemary's problem, not mine. But now that I occupied Rosemary's life, the realization had dawned: *There's such a thing as too much brotherly love.*

At this point in my current life, my little brother was only four years old and at peak cuteness. He would follow me wherever I went. There was no question that I found him adorable, plodding along behind me like a baby chick. Recently however, his behavior had started to get a little weird. He would often burst into tears whenever I left him, and his jealous disdain towards anyone who approached me was becoming less cute.

The final straw was a moment when Johan had lunged at the maid who'd caught me after I'd almost fallen in my room. When he'd grabbed a letter opener from the desk and pointed it at the maid, I'd almost started screaming. Of course, I'd stood in front of her with arms outstretched to block his path, so nothing had come of it. This was the point where his obsessive behavior had crossed a line.

I mean, she's a maid. She's a woman. And she was just trying to help! What kind of psychopath would attack her for that?

No more violence, no more yandere!

As I witnessed my brother showing early signs of abnormality, I thought to myself, *We've got to do something about this boy, quick.*

Returning to the present circumstances, I addressed Chris: "This isn't really something I should trouble you with. But I doubt that our father would replace his teachers, even if I asked him."

Chris hummed thoughtfully.

The king had few hopes for the second prince. I understood why he wouldn't want to fuss over Johan when he already had a capable heir, but my younger brother deserved at least a little thought. Johan's teachers, who only taught lesson plans that would personally please him, were negligent at best.

Mother's just as bad, I thought. She ought to have selected his teachers a little

more carefully.

“What he needs is someone that he can respect. Someone he will listen to,” I stated clearly. “As long as I’m the only person willing to tell him off, he’ll continue to retreat further from the rest of the world.”

And to be honest, I’d like to put the brakes on the whole siscon thing.

There was a beat of silence where Chris stood, arms folded, before speaking. “Truth be told, that has been worrying me too.”

I saw myself reflected in his eyes, which he had cast downward in deep thought.

“I don’t see him very often, but even in those brief moments I can see that he is overly dependent on you.” Chris let out a slight laugh, practically just a breath. “After all, every time you and I meet, Johan glares daggers at me from behind your back.” Judging from the sympathetic look in his eyes, I was certain Johan’s evil stare was replaying in his mind.

I felt guilty for being the cause of this friction between my brothers, and wanted to kneel down and beg for Chris’s forgiveness.

“Is he hostile with others too?” asked Chris.

“Yes,” I said, winding up to relay the full story. I gave Chris a rundown of the time he’d tried to attack the maid, and Chris furrowed his eyebrows in response.

“I can understand that he’s desperate and doesn’t want anyone to take away his precious sister, but attacking a maid goes beyond a child’s tantrum.”

Yep, I thought wryly, adopting a blank-eyed, long-distance stare. He’s come down with a case of yandere-itis. I had my hands full when he was diagnosed as just a siscon—there is no way I can handle him progressing into a yandere.

So much for my mental health I guess.

What more could I have done? I tried to stop him, but whenever I left him, he would just get worse! He keeps hounding me, asking if I am abandoning him. Any more and I’ll faint!

The moment when the color seemed to drain from Johan’s eyes and they

turned glassy, I knew.

This game's broken. I can't handle this on my own.

"There's nobody around to keep him in check," I said to Chris, "so he'll never get better, only worse. If only I were tolerant enough to lead him down the right path. I'm ashamed to say I'm a failure of a sister." I'd fully expected Chris to chastise me, but I was stunned when he widened his eyes once again.

Holding a hand to his chin, he let out a short sigh. His expression was one of great surprise or shock. "I knew you were mature for your age, but maybe you're a bit *too* brilliant."

"Huh? Did you say something?" I asked, confused. I couldn't quite make out what Chris had muttered under his breath, but he ignored my request for him to repeat himself. He put an end to my query and then continued speaking at a normal volume.

"Nothing. You're doing a fine job," he said earnestly. "You are most certainly not a failure, Rose. However much power and tolerance you possess, there are things that can't be done alone. That's exactly why you came to me, right?"

I gave Chris a strong nod in agreement, then straightened my posture.

Right, time to make it or break it. Let's do this!

"If you'll allow it, I'd like you to take a firm hand in raising our brother," I said. "Please, make Johan into someone who will one day stand by your side."

This was the whole reason I'd asked Chris and not my mother. The king would listen to Chris because he was the heir, and with Chris on my side, the prospect of changing teachers wouldn't seem so bleak. Plus, I trusted my wise and self-disciplined older brother to find teachers that were perfect. With one request, Chris would solve multiple issues, like hitting two birds with one stone. In the best-case scenario, we might even nail bird number three—more frequent exposure to Chris might enable Johan to develop into an honest man.

"And you're really all right with that?" Chris asked in a hushed voice after listening to my request. His implication was clear: *Are you all right with not only replacing his teachers, but also sending him to work for me?*

Once his education started in earnest, Johan and I would no longer have much time to spend together. His path in life would split from mine.

In Chris's eyes, I probably seemed just as dependent on Johan, and he was worried that sending the youngest prince off on a journey would leave me alone and unable to cope. The concern was appreciated, but honestly, not needed. If Chris could get Johan standing on his own two feet, that would give me more space to work towards my own goals. I couldn't ask for more than that.

I might find my little brother cute, but that's irrelevant. I'm ready for him to become his own person.

"Of course—I'm fine with it," I answered Chris at once. "However far apart we are, I will always be his sister."

Johan, I'll be watching over you from heav—well, from somewhere, anyway. Grow up to be a respectable man.

"I see," Chris whispered, treating me to a rare, gentle smile.

I closed my eyes the instant I saw it. It was beautiful, radiant.

That angelic expression is too much for my impure eyes to bear.

Chris must have taken the suggestion to our father after our talk, because Johan's layabout teachers were soon shown the door, and stricter, more professional teachers took their place.

Chris himself took a part in Johan's education, and he didn't cut the boy any slack. Not one bit.

I'm counting on you, little brother. Stick to the right path and grow up to be normal.

The Valiant Struggle of the Reincarnated Princess Next on the agenda—breaking the flag of a narcissistic noble brat.

George zu Eigel was the heir to a marquis and Rosemary's future fiancé in the game. Though I stated this rather matter-of-factly, it bears repeating: he would one day be Rosemary's—as in, *my*—husband.

Ha ha ha... Give me a break! What did I do to deserve pledging my life to that self-obsessed freak?

I had half a mind to fob him off on the game's heroine, but my conscience reined me in. I figured that I should at least try to make him slightly more presentable before handing him over to the shrine maiden. To do that, I'd need to recall his upbringing.

Most of the game's characters had tragic backstories, and George was no exception. George's mother had possessed a fragile, otherworldly beauty, with silky platinum-blond hair and eyes like amethysts. But beauty and luck rarely go together, and sure enough, she'd passed away in the game when George was only eight years old.

The young child was overrun with grief from the loss of his beautiful mother, but nobody was around to console him. His father, the marquis, fell into despair without his beloved wife; he turned to hard living and paid no attention to his suddenly isolated son. George had an uncle as well, Julius, but this uncle was more focused on desperately trying to pull his brother, the marquis, out of a deep depression.

Left completely alone, George continued to search for something to remind him of his mother. He holed himself up in her room and barred the servants from entering.

One day, he found his mother in the mirror.

As George wore his mother's shawl over the top of his head, he gazed into the mirror's surface and saw her—a person that looked identical to his mother, the

Lady of the White Lily.

However, that figure was none other than George himself.

He realized he could see his mother at any time, as long as he had a mirror, glass, or even water—anything which showed his reflection. That moment was the origin of George's narcissism.

Whoa. Like, just whoa. I never expected that pervert to have such a tragic past.

In my present life, it was apparent that George's mother was still alive, but sickly. George and I first met when I was five and he was six; the intention was probably to match us as potential fiancés, but I dropped him early and warmed to his mother instead.

Even in her sickly state, she sat upright in her bed and smiled at me. The marquis shot her a worried look from his position by her side, then introduced us.

"Please forgive the breach of etiquette, Your Highness. My wife can't leave the bed. She's frail, and the change of seasons takes its toll on her health."

"It's an honor to meet you," said the beautiful woman. "I'm Marquis Morwitz's wife, Emma."

"I'm Rosemary," I said, returning the greeting. I was enchanted by her beaming smile.

So this woman gets to be a fragile beauty and possess an innocent smile? That's not fair! Oh God, she's just way too cute.

At this point I had fallen head over heels for Emma, and I played the future fiancée card in order to come see her as often as I could. Thinking back on it, having a princess visit so often might've been a nuisance for them, but Emma always seemed happy to see me. She even called me Mary, and returned my affection by cherishing me like a daughter.

Emma, my angel, my goddess!

Oh. George. Still here, are you?

Over the course of my first few visits, I discerned a few causes of her ill health.

First, she had no enthusiasm for eating. And when she did eat, she ate poorly.

You like fruits, hate veggies, and want me to believe you're not a child? Not liking carrots is cute and all, but Emma, you need your vitamins.

Second, she rarely, if ever, exercised. It seemed like she often spent her day in bed reading a book or practicing embroidery. I assumed that a lack of exercise exacerbated her poor appetite. On top of that, not eating meant she had no energy, which created a vicious and self-destructive cycle.

Third, she saw very little sunlight. She hardly ever went outside, so she spent no time under the sky. Humans need the sun's light though. I couldn't remember exactly why, but I thought it had to do with the formation of bones and autonomic nerves, or something like that.

Plus, I personally think that being stuck in a room all day is a downer. People shouldn't roast in the sun, but everyone still needs natural light on their skin.

I wasn't a doctor in my past life, so if her problem was a disease then I couldn't help, but Emma didn't appear to be suffering from any serious condition. She was prone to catching colds as the seasons changed, and they often lingered.

If her lifestyle is the only problem, then we might be able to prevent her death in two years by increasing her stamina.

With that goal in mind, I decided to round up George and his uncle Julius to attempt to improve Emma's health.

I walked around the mansion looking for them and spotted George in a corner of the garden. He stood in front of the beautiful, well-curated white roses that were in full bloom.

"George, I'd like to have a little chat, if you don't mind?" I called out to him.

"Of course, what is it?"

George tilted his head with a puzzled look on his face. His soft hair spilled over his shoulders. When he took that pose, his delicate good looks, so similar to his mother's, conjured images of a sweet princess. The roses behind him added to his beauty, making me feel like I was looking at a scene from a shojo manga.

He wore a white blouse with baggy sleeves and a lace cravat, along with a well-tailored dark-green gilet and culotte. These and his other clothes marked him as a child of nobility, but honestly, he looked more like a beautiful woman in drag than a boy.

When I first met him, I couldn't believe he wasn't a girl. I had only known the grown-up—and horribly twisted—George, so I couldn't reconcile the innocent girlish boy in front of me and the probably-guilty-of-something narcissist that he would grow up to be.

His soft, platinum hair was fastened near the nape of his neck, and he had large, violet eyes. One look at his drooping eyebrows and flushed cheeks would leave boys his age vying to protect him.

Too bad for them that he's a guy.

In keeping with his dainty features, he was shy; at first, all attempts at communication failed. He would always run away and could put any hamster to shame with his swiftness. Though I could have run after him, I was planning to keep him at arm's length anyway, so I let him be. Therefore, contrary to the plans the adults made to have us befriend each other, we hardly spoke after our first introduction.

The only reason we'd managed to reach a point where we could hold a normal conversation was because of Emma.

George was nothing short of a mama's boy. Every new song that he learned he would sing for her, every pretty flower he found he would give to her, and everything tasty he would share with her. In his spare time, he would sit with her and read. When she was sick with a cold and he wasn't allowed into her room, he would twiddle his thumbs by her door or in the garden. He clung to his mother twenty-four hours a day.

Remember, I only visited the Eigel household to see Emma. But that meant that George and I would inevitably encounter one another, because he was glued to her side. While George usually avoided me like the plague, he couldn't bring himself to argue when his cherished mother laughed and said, "You two get along so well."

George and I began to talk more and more, albeit awkwardly. I doubted

George had spoken to a girl his age before. He often fumbled trying to find the right topic.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), I was never interested in the topics that girls my age usually favored. In my mind, dresses and jewels always played second fiddle to books and pictures. Embroidery and dancing weren't as appealing as chess and horseback riding.

George had a surprisingly strong thirst for knowledge and a powerful curiosity. He would shower me with compliments when I recited the information I'd learned from reading; I could keenly remember the awed looks he gave me when I told him spare trivia about random subjects. His adoration made my conscience twinge—I wanted to appear intelligent, but he seemed to overestimate my actual knowledge of those topics, which was shallow and surface level. My guilt at possibly deceiving him drove me to go back and study those subjects in-depth, until I really knew what I was talking about. The more I learned, the more he would listen to me with wonder in his eyes.

Though the Kingdom of Nevel was one of the largest countries on the continent, the world was much bigger than that. Beyond Nevel's borders were great lands covered in ice, a sight unseen in our temperate country, as well as deserts of endless sand, seas that reflected the sky like a mirror, and forests of colossal trees that scraped the sky. There were countless landscapes that our young eyes had never seen.

George had once asked whether we could travel to see these sights, and I'd responded that his journey would depend on his own will. When he'd asked whether I'd go with him, I had responded that I'd go by myself one day. I thought he might shrink back from me because of my bratty answers, which were unfit for a girl, let alone a princess. But for some reason, they delighted him.

Before I knew it, George had begun to warm up to me, and began to behave around me in the same friendly way he did with his family.

I know he's older than me, but I kind of like the idea of adding a new little brother to the mix.

"Mother's diet?" George asked.

We had seated ourselves in the Eigers' living room. I rested on the sofa, which was made of elegant, curved mahogany and high-quality leather, and nodded to George.

"Yes. I want you to rework her diet around vegetables," I said matter-of-factly.

"But mother finds vegetables..." George said, his words trailing off as his expression darkened.

Yes, indeed. I know all about your mom's hate-hate relationship with vegetables.

"That's why I want to come up with some dishes that even a veggie-phobe can enjoy. Do you have any thoughts, Julius?"

I pulled Julius into the conversation, and he lifted his hand to his chin in thought. In contrast to George's androgyny, Julius was the ideal, mature man. He had well-proportioned facial features, faint lips, and light-brown hair combed backwards. His slightly drowsy green eyes softened the rugged expression of his good looks.

"Well, my sister isn't a big eater," said Julius after a moment of thought. "I think soup would be the go-to solution, but even that she doesn't like very much."

"How does she season it?" I asked.

"Just a little bit of salt, I think."

I had directed the question to Julius, who was smiling wryly, but before he had a chance to respond, George answered from his side.

Only a little bit of salt? I can see why that would exacerbate her veggie-hate.

Consommé soup crossed my mind as an option, but I doubted whether this world had consommé. *And if we're making it by hand, it'll take quite a while.*

In my past life, cooking had been such a huge passion of mine that I'd joined the home economics club in high school. I'd given consommé a shot once back then, and the recipe had needed a lot of ingredients, time, and effort.

I think I got as far as skimming the scum from the top of the soup before I

swore, “never again.” Besides, I can’t see us being able to find the same ingredients in this world.

“Ah!” I said suddenly, clapping my hands. I ignored George, who was peering at me full of interest, and ran a recipe through my mind.

How about a potage? I bet anyone could feed that to a veggie-hating kid and they’d slurp it right up.

We could make it without consommé too. An electric mixer would have made things easier, but if we used a strainer, it shouldn’t be impossible. Best of all, potage comes in many different varieties. We could go for pumpkins or potatoes, turnips or carrots. We could even get more adventurous later with tomato gazpacho and cold soups.

I wonder if we can get olive oil and wine vinegar? What about soy milk? How many condiments do they have in this world?

“Julius!” As I shouted his name, Julius’s eyes shot wide open.

“Yes?”

I closed in on him. “Do you handle foreign condiments?”

Julius operated as a trader because only the eldest son would inherit the title in noble families. Born a second son, Julius had entered the world of trading to test his abilities and found that he had an aptitude for it. He’d steadily built up a customer base by locating products that hadn’t yet broken into the Nevel trading market, like fermented foods from the small countries to the east, or exotic fabrics and thread, woven according to the generational traditions of a clan in the west.

In my previous world, I guess we’d call him an up-and-coming young entrepreneur.

“Of course. We handle several kinds of tried-and-true ingredients, like salt and sugar, alongside quite a few others like vinegars and oils. Recently, we’ve taken on a fermented condiment made from fish.”

Wait, do you mean Thai fish sauce?! Oh my God, I’m excited. I wonder if he has soy sauce? What about mustard? Curry powder?

“Would you care to have a look?” Julius peered at me, and he was obviously enjoying the way I failed to contain my excitement. His mature composure, steadfast until now, gave way to a smirk, and his eyes glinted like those of a child up to no good.

Where’d that sudden change of demeanor come from? The lighthearted deviation from Julius’s usual personality was almost too cute to handle. Is every member of this family going to overload me with gap moe?

“Yes please!” I responded enthusiastically.

After that, Julius and I co-opted one of the Eigel family’s unsuspecting chefs and got to work devising recipes.

Should we just go with corn? Or maybe potatoes? Oh, but I do like extra-sweet pumpkins. I’m tempted to go with something warm, but maybe cold soup would be easier for Emma to drink.

I composed a list of all the recipes I could remember, then called everyone into a meeting.

The chef was flustered and hesitant to deal with a princess at first, but we bonded quite a bit as the debate heated up. An argument erupted when he handed me balsamic vinegar after I had clearly explained wine vinegar to him.

They might both be made from the same thing, but the refining process is different, so the taste and usage of each is distinct. I’ll die on this hill.

We got on fine though, eventually. I felt that the conflict brought us closer, like boys who become friends after beating each other up by the riverside. We were each other’s equals in stubbornness, so I would occasionally blow my lid, and the phrase “ignorant old bastard” almost made it past my lips a few times. I restrained myself though, in the end. Prim and proper princesses don’t cuss people out while giving them the finger.

Julius didn’t join in the arguments and instead assumed a mediator role, calming us down when the discussion veered off track. I honestly felt bad that I hadn’t only taken up his time but had also caused him plenty of trouble.

The marquis, Lord Morwitz, was taken aback at my daily visits, but he gladly gave his assent when he learned that our aim was to improve Emma’s health.

Well, she is the world to him, after all.

When George tearfully asked what he could do to help his mother, I set him up with a different task to stop his whimpering. He was to take on an important role: accompany Emma on a short walk every day, if possible. Emma likely wouldn't refuse if the request came from her cute son.

Actually, she's such a kind person that I doubt she'd turn up her nose, no matter who invited her.

The lengths of their walks gradually increased, with allowances for the weather, the climate, and how Emma felt on any given day. The sight of mother and son admiring the flowers and birds as they took their leisurely strolls brought joy to the marquis and the servants watching over them. I noticed the gradual reinvigoration of the garden with new flowers and sculptures, and assumed that it was the marquis's doing.

He really is crazy-in-love with his wife.

It also seemed that the corn potage, perfected through hours of hard work, was to Emma's liking. I had to reach for a tissue when Emma called it delicious.

I clasped hands with the chef who'd worked with us and jumped for joy. Then Julius, overcome with emotion, scooped me up and swung me around.

All right, let's calm down a tad, guys.

Her appetite and her meals grew larger with time, and Emma's complexion visibly began to improve. Recently, she had taken to drinking tea with Julius and myself in the arbor at one end of the garden. She hardly ever took ill anymore, even as the seasons changed.

This is all wonderful progress, but I can't let my guard down until George turns eight in a year's time. I think we're good though.

My joy came out in a smile as I looked at Emma's rosy cheeks and slightly plump figure. But then, the beautiful woman shone her girlish grin upon me and threw me into a minefield.

"So Mary, when will you be joining our family?"

"Uhh...what?" I asked, flabbergasted.

The shock almost dislodged the porcelain teacup from my hand. I placed my cup back on the saucer to cover my flustering, but thanks to my trembling fingers, this came with an ugly clattering noise.

“M-Mother!!!” a beetroot George said. I was seated next to him, and my face drained of color.

Crap. I forgot. I completely forgot to break the flag that would lead to my engagement with George!!! I was too caught up in breaking Emma’s death flag to remember.

Not just that, but now that I was a semipermanent feature at a possible fiancé’s house, our future was pretty much set in stone. My own stupidity had paved the way for my destruction.

“Lord Morwitz and I are always talking about how we can’t wait for the day our family gets an adorable new daughter. He thinks of you as his own, just as I do. Lately, he’s been champing at the bit, saying he’ll have to work with George to make him the wonderful man you deserve.”

Oh no, what do I do? I don’t have it in me to tell her that I have absolutely no interest in marrying her son, not when her eyes are full of so much hope.

If I had sensed even the slightest hint that this arranged marriage was a scheme to forge ties with the royal family, I don’t think that letting them down would’ve been so hard. But Emma’s smile showed no signs of anything nefarious.

I really would love to be your daughter, but no deal. I’ve already decided to pledge my whole heart to the as-yet-unmet guard captain. Actually, if I’m honest, this whole scenario is quite weird—asking me, someone with a mental age of twenty-plus years, to view George, currently seven years old, as a serious romantic option is a little creepy.

Just when panic-induced sweat started to coat my palms, a lifeline dropped in from an unexpected direction.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, sister,” Julius said. A spectator until now, he placed his teacup down and plastered a smirk across his face.

“Do you think so?”

“I do. As bright as the princess is, she’s still only six. How do you expect her to talk about marriage when it’s still so far off in her future?”

“You’re right,” said Emma as she turned to me. “Sorry, Mary. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I suppose I was rushing things too much.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, greatly relieved. “I’m so happy that you think of me as a daughter.”

Even though her words were kind, Emma’s mood sank after Julius’s rebuke. I wanted to apply a hurried patch to the conversation, but after a moment’s hesitation, I made up my mind and started to speak.

This might be my only chance to say it, I thought and took the leap.

“It’s just, I...umm. There’s someone else.”

“Huh?!”

“What!”

“Well now.”

The first to react to my declaration was George, followed by Emma, and Julius was last. George blanched and rose to his feet, Emma’s eyes lit up, and Julius sported an intrigued grin.



“Oh my! What’s he like, exactly?” I had imagined Emma would be disappointed, but she charged in for the details.

I guess girls in every world share a passion for love stories.

I found myself in desperate straits when Emma shooed George and Julius out of the room and started to wring me for information. I hadn’t actually met the guard captain yet, so I had to fudge the details as I told her. But even as vague as the information was, it satisfied Emma.

As I left, she smiled and said, “I’ll support you.” This change of heart surely meant that I had managed to avoid George’s engagement flag. Hopefully.

Well, fingers crossed, anyway.

A Shock for the Reincarnated Princess

“Sister!!!”

“Oof.”

It happened one afternoon—after Emma’s condition had considerably improved, I was able to spend less time visiting the Eigers and more time at home in the palace, focusing on my studies in earnest.

As I walked towards the library, through the cloister overlooking the garden, a blond missile flew right into my chest.

“Sister! Sister! Sister!”

A mop of bright blond curly hair eviscerated my midriff at full speed. The missile was a full head shorter than me, and his arms and legs looked so thin that they might’ve snapped under strain. A layer of tears shimmered over his large eyes, which were a deep shade of aqua blue.

This missile was obviously my little brother, Johan, whose adorable looks were akin to an angel from a religious fresco. His arms were much less frail than their appearance suggested because he mercilessly strangled my abdomen in his embrace.

Johan! For my sake, try to hold back a little. I want to keep my internal organs on the inside.

“Miss Rosemary! Are you hurt?” my personal guard asked from his position behind me. Alarm had crept onto his refreshingly handsome face.

“I’m all right,” I said.

Despite his youth, my personal guard was skilled and dependable. The only reason he had not reacted to the hugging assault was because he knew that the missile was a prince.

“Johan.”

While I was conflicted about how to respond to my little brother, who was clinging to me like a puppy, a stern voice called his name. Johan’s tiny body

tensed up.

Standing before us was an intelligent-looking and attractive boy holding a wooden training sword—my older brother, Christoph.

“Get back here. We’re in the middle of training,” Chris said. His cold tone and disinterested expression packed a punch. Even though I knew that I wasn’t the target of Chris’s reprimand, I was compelled to stand up straight.

Unfortunately, Chris’s tactic spooked Johan into clinging even harder.

Why are little kids’ hands so strong? Johan, if you don’t let up, your sister’s organs are about to come out and play.

Chris sighed and looked to the ground; his long eyelashes framed his downturned, ice-blue gaze.

Johan jumps at every little thing Chris does. What exactly is this training that he’s being made to do?

“Good afternoon, Chris,” I said politely. “I’m terribly sorry for interrupting your lesson.”

I could see that the afternoon hadn’t actually been good, but I thought it best to greet Chris with pleasantries anyway.

“Not at all,” Chris said, shaking his head. His face was still expressionless, but his gaze was gentle. “You’re not to blame. Johan has just been in low spirits because he hasn’t seen you in a while.”

Apparently, when Johan had spotted me walking to the library, he’d abandoned his training to run after me.

That was slightly careless of me. I’d better take more notice of which routes I travel, and when.

“Johan,” I said, kneeling down to make eye contact with my slightly shorter brother.

“Sister,” he called out to me. Tears formed in his big, upturned eyes.

This little boy was so fond of me—I couldn’t help but find him cute. Even if he was needy and a crybaby. And possessive. And annoying.

But if I'm soft on him now, nothing will change.

"Johan, apologize to Chris," I said sternly.

"Huh?" I could see my serious expression reflected in his wide, surprised eyes.

I'm sorry, Johan. But I've decided to take a hard-line attitude with you. Things are different from when we spent our days snuggled together, just the two of us. I have to broaden my horizons, and so do you. I won't be a useless, overindulgent sister any longer.

"Chris made time in his busy schedule to train you, and you've wasted it. Apologize."

Johan scrunched up his cute face. He released his hands from where they clutched at my clothes, and gripped his trousers instead. The tip of his nose shone bright red from holding back tears.

His head still downcast, he began to mutter, "I'm s-sorr—"

"I can't hear you," I interrupted. "Look up. Look at Chris and speak properly."

Johan froze, aside from letting out a teary snuffle. By my side, the guard's expression stiffened. Chris looked stunned.

I bet they all think I'm a terrifying sister. But I've made up my mind to ditch the mollycoddling and become a little monstrous. If they think I'm harsh, that's fine by me.

"I'm..." Johan sniffled again, "sorr—"

"Again," I said, unrelenting.

"I'm sorry!!!"

After seeing Johan stand bolt upright and yell out his apology, I finally softened my expression.

There's a good boy.

I nodded in satisfaction, then turned to Chris and froze. Chris had listened to Johan's boisterous apology with a strained smile, but it wasn't him that shocked me.

At some point, a figure had walked up behind Chris. He wore a knight's

apparel, and held a wooden sword in his hand, the same as Chris's. He must have been teaching Chris and Johan how to handle a training weapon.

That makes sense, seeing as he's the best swordsman in the country.

He had unruly hair that was coarse and dark, and his black eyes glinted sharply. His masculine cheeks and the outline of his jaw were the same as those in *Hidden World's* graphics, but without his beard, he looked younger.

No "looked" about it. He is younger.

He was tall enough to tower over me, and he had a firm build, with just the right amount of muscle. This wild-looking man stared at me like I was a funny animal.

"C-Chris," I stammered.

"Yes? What's wrong, Rose?"

Everything. Please, Chris, tell me I'm mistaken. Tell me that's not who I think it is.



“Who is that?” I asked.

“Oh,” responded Chris. “This is our sword-fighting instructor. He’s a knight serving in the royal guard.”

Taking his cue from Chris, the knight knelt before me. He respectfully took my hand and brought it almost to his lips. As his breath brushed across my fingers, I couldn’t help but stiffen up.

“I am Leonhart von Orsein, of the royal guard. It is an honor beyond my worth to be in your presence,” he said in the low, sweet voice that had captured my heart.

I don’t think I could have made a worse impression, I thought as I trembled. I was overjoyed that I’d finally met him, but also embarrassed that our first meeting was when I was chastising my brother in full-on bitch mode.

My long-awaited encounter with the future guard captain had occurred in the worst way possible.

“I, uh...” I said, words faltering. The sheer shock of his sudden presence left me dumbfounded and stuck in place.

God. I seriously wanna cry.

I had resolved to improve myself as much as possible so that I could be ready for the day when we would meet. That was the reason why I hadn’t yet sought him out, despite knowing that he was probably already in the royal guard when Rosemary was a child.

Besides, no matter how strong I came on to him, a young girl my age stood no chance. At the start of *Hidden World*, Rosemary had been fifteen or sixteen, and Sir Leonhart thirty-one. Even at that age, it would have been unlikely for him to have given Rosemary a shot at romance. At present, my prospects were completely out of the question.

I told myself that meeting him would only get me down—now, I haven’t just stumbled across him, I’ve also shown him the worst side of myself. It’s over. My romance has bitten the dust before it had a chance to start.

“Your Highness, is something the matter?” asked Sir Leonhart.

“N-No. I’m quite all right.” I shook my head and forced the tears back.

I pulled my hand away from his big palm and took a step back. The suspicious glances stung.

“Sister? Do you hurt somewhere?” Even though I’d been harsh to him earlier, Johan gazed at me, full of concern.

I stroked his hair to let him know I was okay. He smiled, relieved. My little brother’s innocent kindness racked me with guilt.

Sorry Johan.

Just as I was trying to change my coddling attitude and take a hard-line approach towards raising Johan, I wavered.

Regardless, trying to act like an angel only when around the object of my romantic affections is neither cool nor fair, and is rather deceptive. From now on, I’ll drop the innocent act and play a devilish older sister, no matter who’s watching!

“Please accept my apologies for my unsightly display,” I said, composing myself as much as possible. “I’m the first princess, Rosemary. Please look after my two brothers.”

I wrestled what I hoped was a smile out of my rigid facial muscles. I couldn’t see my own face, but if I’d managed to produce a non-forced smile, then I deserved a pat on the back.

“Unsightly?” Sir Leonhart picked out one of my words and whispered it to himself. For some reason, he looked perplexed. He blinked his surprising long eyelashes a couple of times.

“Sir Orsein?” I inquired.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but when you say ‘unsightly,’ are you referring to the valiant figure you cut a moment ago?”

Upon hearing the word “valiant” I gulped inadvertently. I wasn’t sure what was going on in his head when he chose that phrasing, but I prayed he wasn’t being sarcastic.

Otherwise, I’d be heartbroken beyond recovery.

I said nothing.

Sir Leonhart narrowed his almond eyes and gave a kind smile, apparently finding an answer in my silence.

His unexpected reaction left me at a loss for words. He grinned gently as he watched me. "Forgive me. A knight ought to never embarrass a lady. But, if you will pardon my transgression, I would like to say one thing."

"Umm, yes?" I responded, not knowing where his train of thought was headed.

"When I saw you earlier, I thought to myself, 'what a cool princess.'"

"Oh!" The moment I understood what Sir Leonhart had said, my skin almost audibly heated to a boil. I didn't have to look in a mirror to know that my face had turned bright red.

I mean, even my ears are burning.

What should I do? I made my decision to take a tough attitude only seconds ago! Scary sisters don't blush. Devilish sisters don't sit around smirking to themselves, carried away by romantic thoughts.

Unfortunately, however much I tried to convince myself, my body gave me away. The redness of my cheeks refused to subside, and my facial muscles threatened to break ranks at the slightest distraction. All I could do was look down, lips trembling.

Sir Leonhart isn't to be taken lightly.

I was no match for him; he could pull my strings any way he wanted.

"Sister."

"Ah! Johan!" I said.

I had completely forgotten that Johan was standing there until he called for me. When I snapped my head around to look at him, I saw him staring back at me with a horrid, empty glint in his blue eyes. A chill ran up my spine.

Uh-oh. Somebody's pissed.

He's right to be, though. One minute I'm yelling at him, and the next, I'm

going tomato red in front of another man. Why wouldn't he think I'm trying to make a fool out of him?

I'm wicked! I'm loose! I'm a slut! I'm such an idiot!

"Why are you blushing, sister?" Johan asked in a voice so cold that I couldn't believe it came from his mouth.

"I, uhh..." The words had fled from my tongue. I'd wanted to apologize, but then I lost my chance to do even that.

"Johan," Chris interjected, probably unable to watch me try to fumble for an excuse. "No more teasing Rosemary."

"But Christoph!"

"I do understand how you feel," said Chris, "but blaming Rosemary is barking up the wrong tree."

"Okay." Johan hung his head and looked annoyed after Chris's chastising.

S-Sorry Johan. I'm at fault for getting carried away, and now you're having to hold your tongue about something you don't think is right. I really am sorry.

Chris continued his rebuke: "You should now understand why there's no point in stomping your feet and keeping Rose locked up."

"Yes," said Johan.

"Then let's get back to training. There's plenty to learn."

Uh, Chris, what was that? I don't think catching a little love fever is grounds to lock me up.

I had no idea what Chris was talking about, but Johan seemed to understand. He nodded in response to Chris's question, and carried a dignified look on his face.

I'm feeling kinda like the odd one out here.

"Sorry for the wait, Sir Leonhart. Let's go," Chris said.

"Yes, Your Highness," said the knight.

"I'll see you later, Rose," said Chris as he turned to leave. "Apologies for the

commotion.”

“R-Right,” I replied, still slightly confused. “Good luck with your training.”

Chris and Johan walked away, leaving me floundering to understand the conversation. Though Chris had said his farewells before leaving, Johan remained silent and gave only a bow.

My little brother might actually hate me now. I did want to get rid of his siskon nature, but I never wanted to push him to the other extreme.

Well, I’m reaping what I’ve sown, I guess.

For some reason, Johan stopped in front of Sir Leonhart. His large eyes glimmered with a challenging look.

A few seconds of silence passed. Eventually, without a single word, Johan began walking towards the training grounds.

It might’ve been my imagination, but from behind, Johan seemed slightly bigger than before.

Monologue of the First Prince

After we parted from Rose, Johan started sword training again. He didn't spare a glance at anything else—not even me, his brother.

Although the wooden sword that Johan held had been designed for children, it was still rather heavy; his small hands had trouble holding it up. I could see a possible accident on the horizon as I watched his little body lurch with every swing of the sword. However, he needed to learn, so the idea of stopping his wild strikes didn't cross my mind.

Johan, the spoiled youngest child, who'd only ever hidden behind his sister's skirt, was taking his long-awaited first step towards growing up. I had no intention of hindering that progress. Even if he fell and injured himself, he was now more than capable of learning a lesson from it.

My prediction hardened to conviction when I saw him grit his teeth and grimace in frustration. Johan was probably quite irritated that the sword he was swinging was swinging him back.

"He's an entirely different person, isn't he?" commented the man beside me, practically reading my mind.

"He is, thanks to you," I said, half-joking.

From his lofty height where he towered above me, the man formed his lips into a smirk. "Sometimes, it pays to play the villain."

This man rolling carefree thoughts off his tongue was called Leonhart von Orsein. He was a knight serving in the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard, and was considered to be the most successful soldier of his generation.

His skill with a blade was why I decided to recommend him as Johan's sword-fighting instructor, but I couldn't have known that he'd have such a surprising secondary effect.

The parting look on my sister's face replayed in my mind—the second she'd seen Leonhart, her big eyes had opened to their fullest, and her small mouth had hung agape. The sight of her childish, round cheeks flushed red was the

perfect picture of a young girl in the throes of her first love.

Rose's precocious and mature manner of speaking usually made her stand out from her peers, but for the first time that I can remember, her expression seemed appropriate for her age.

However slow I might've been in matters of romance, even I could tell: *My sister is in love with Leonhart.*

I said nothing and turned my gaze to the side.

Leonhart was a staggeringly tall man; he must have been nearly one hundred and ninety centimeters. He had a strong build, and his supple muscles were visible even through his clothes. His features were quite well proportioned, but the sharpness of his eyes made it hard to call him "pretty."

Gallant? No, "manly" is the word that I think fits him best.

I'd heard that most young girls preferred calm, kind men, or perhaps men who looked androgynous. In particular, someone like Rose's personal guard seemed more appropriate—a man who always wore a friendly smile appeared more likely to capture a little girl's heart. But instead of the knight who was always by her side protecting her, Rose wanted Leonhart.

Little sister, as far as first crushes go, you've given yourself quite the challenge, I thought, astounded. At the same time, I was impressed that she knew a good man when she saw one.

Leonhart would attract attention one way or another—his skill with the sword was said to be the best in our country, and he possessed rugged good looks.

Heroic rumors about him also abounded.

In one of the stories, Leonhart, accompanied by only a few other elite soldiers, had completely wiped out a group of bandits that they'd encountered while out on a marching maneuver; he'd then rescued all the children that the bandits had abducted. Another rumor said that every single one of his subordinates, without exception, had made rank.

There was even some gossip about how a foreign princess had fallen in love with him at first sight when he'd been assigned as her guard—apparently, she'd

tried to entice him into returning to her home country with her.

Besides just those, rumors of every kind floated around him—some said that he'd defeated a lion, and there were tales of him single-handedly crushing a whole company of soldiers.

I knew for a fact that the rumors about him defeating the bandits and the ones about his subordinates' promotions were true; Leonhart possessed both superb leadership skills and the ability to assign his men to roles that best suited each of their strengths. It seemed inevitable that those in his company would flourish. I didn't know whether the story about the princess falling in love at first sight was true, but I wasn't boorish enough to check.

During one of our conversations, I'd asked him whether he'd defeated a lion. He'd confirmed the story but corrected one detail—it was a tiger, not a lion. Regardless, the rumor had already taken root, and Leonhart had been given the nickname "Black Lion."

I remembered him going quiet with an incredibly awkward look on his face when I'd joked, "That sounds better than 'Black Tiger.' You should leave it as is."

When I'd asked about whether he'd eliminated an entire company of soldiers, he'd grinned and responded that he hadn't kept count.

All in all, he was too far beyond the ordinary for a little girl's crush. However smart and fair Rosemary may have been, the prospects of her first love being returned were dismal. Add in the age difference, and her chances shrank even further.

Sympathetic pain gripped my chest as I imagined Rose in anguish over an unrequited love. Even so, I was absolutely certain that she would, one day, win over a wonderful man.

Though, on this point, I might've been in agreement with Johan—we both wished for that day to be as far in the future as possible.

"Ouch!"

A quiet yelp dragged my mind from the rabbit hole it had wandered down.

Johan's wooden sword fell to the ground with a clatter, and he clutched his

right hand. Pain distorted his face. It was either grazed skin or a sprained wrist. He'd been slashing the sword with reckless abandon, but not in the way he'd been instructed to by Leonhart. Instead, he'd just been swinging rashly in his own style.

I wasn't too surprised by this outcome; I had expected Johan to injure himself at some point.

"Go to the infirmary if you've hurt yourself," I ordered calmly, while shooting a staying glance at Leonhart and the guard so as to prevent them from running over to help my brother.

"I'm okay! I can keep going!" said Johan with determination.

My brother refused to give up. It was a moving scene, considering how unenthusiastic he'd been about sword training until today. I wasn't about to admit that though.

"I told you to go to the infirmary," I said icily. "Weren't you listening?"

Johan gulped. His shoulders flinched.

"Continuing to train despite an injury will gain you nothing. What do you think you should do if you wish to become stronger? Why do you think we've provided you with such a brilliant teacher?"

Ask for Leonhart's instruction, I implied, without stating it directly, hoping that Johan would catch on.

Johan hung his head in frustration and bit his lips, but there were no tears in his eyes this time. He had always been an intelligent child, and so he understood that crying would get him nowhere. I'm sure he knew exactly what step he ought to take next.

But understanding and accepting were different matters. His emotions forbade him to ask for help from Leonhart, the wretch who had captured his dear sister's heart.

I guess I can understand the feeling, I grumbled inside my head.

"Johan, if you don't want to make progress, that's up to you. You can do what you like," I said, keeping my sympathetic thoughts to myself.

When I directed those words of abandonment at Johan, his head sprang back up.

“What?” he spouted, a cry of confusion making it past his small lips.

My brother had a much richer range of emotions than I did, but I truly loved him. Even so, I had no intention of pampering his current mood.

“Johan,” I continued, matter-of-fact, “If you want to forsake personal growth and stay where you are, then so be it. But while you’re stagnating, Rose will be taking more and more steps towards her goals.”

My brother’s marine-blue eyes flew wide open and his gaping mouth slammed shut. The confusion within him seemed to give way to angst. The mere mention of Rose’s name carried an immense effect.

I continued my stern lecture: “For her age, Rose’s excellence is nothing short of extraordinary. She has stayed by your side and spoiled you up to this point, but that won’t be the case from now on. Rose will learn all sorts of things—she will grow, nurture new ideas, and set off on her own two feet. If you delay even slightly, within no time, she’ll travel so far from you that she’ll vanish from your sight.”

Johan fell silent, a pathetic look on his face. His lips, white where he had bitten them, mouthed a silent word: *sister*. But his defeated silence lasted only a few seconds.

With a single blink, his expression flipped. Determination burned in his eyes.

The pain of being separated from his sister must far outweigh his own small feelings of pride.

“I understand, Chris. I’ll go to the infirmary and get this patched up.”

“Good.” I nodded.

“Leonhart,” Johan said, turning to address the tall swordsman.

“Yes?”

“When I’m back, please teach me how to wield a sword.” Johan bowed his head.

His glare was spiteful and strained, and his frustrated tone of voice was not appropriate for someone making a request for instruction. I suppose that he just about made the grade though.



“As you wish, Your Highness,” Leonhart responded politely, though he regarded Johan with delight.

I waited for my brother to leave for the infirmary with his guard, then let out a sigh. As I looked up at Leonhart, I found him sporting an incredibly jovial smile.

“*Someone’s* enjoying himself,” I said, letting the impression he’d given me flow unaltered from my mouth. Leonhart looked at me with a broad grin.

“As are you,” he replied briefly.

“I am,” I agreed. “I now have my cute little brother and my little sister by my side. What’s not to enjoy?”

My blank face might have damaged my persuasiveness, but my words were honest and expressed how I really felt.

For most of my life, family had been a foreign concept to me. Death had stolen my mother from me, and my father spoke to me no more than was necessary. I couldn’t remember ever being treated like a son. Our relationship had only ever been that of a king and his heir. Otherwise, I’d always been on my own.

For better (or perhaps for worse), I’d inherited my father’s narrow emotional range. I’d never thought of myself as lonely or melancholic though.

Even when I’d heard that my father had taken a new wife—even when I’d learned that I had a new little brother and sister—I hadn’t been particularly interested. I’d just figured that they would be two more boring puppets, just like me.

But that assumption had been spectacularly wrong.

Rose and I shared our first conversation when she was just three, if I recalled correctly. She had a loveable face, but seemed to be another emotionless child, just like me, and my father before me.

When a sense of duty obliged me to speak with her, I found that she was rather intelligent. I’d tested her at first by introducing the subject of our international trade relations. Her big eyes had visibly shone with interest. She’d

seemed way less engaged with the jewels that I'd given her, and more curious about the northwestern region where they had been mined.

What a strange little sister I have.

I honestly found her cute. She had limitless curiosity and a wide range of emotions. They usually just didn't show on her face.

When he grew old enough, our tiny little brother took up residence in Rose's shadow. I noticed that he deemed me a threat, like I was waiting to snatch his sister away or something. Every time we met, he showered me with glares.

As my siblings grew older, they began to far surpass me with their capacity for emotions.

My stepmother, Nevel's current queen, couldn't stand the idea of my siblings being in contact with me, so I didn't have many chances to see them. But a warm feeling filled my heart nonetheless when I did manage to see them and noticed that they'd grown another inch.

Is this what love is?

"I didn't know that siblings were such lovely things. I can't speak for when Johan marries, but I'm confident that when Rose walks down the aisle, I'll make more of a fuss than even our father." I proclaimed this grandly, crossing my arms and holding my head high.

"My, my. The princess's betrothed will certainly have his work cut out for him," Leonhart said after a hearty laugh.

"Well, not that it will be anytime soon," I responded good-naturedly.

"I wouldn't be so sure. The princess *is* quite the catch."

A slight look of surprise crept onto my face when I heard him say that nonchalantly.

He's probably teasing me, but I don't think he's lying about her being a catch.

I had never heard Leonhart compliment any one particular woman before. *Thinking back, I seem to recall him praising her as a "cool" princess earlier.*

Beautiful, clever, graceful. A word like one of those wouldn't have caught my

attention; “cool,” on the other hand, was an unusual compliment for a lady. This choice of description stuck out to me a little.

“Give her another ten years, and suitors will be lining up at the gates,” Leonhart said.

It goes without saying that, in Leonhart’s eyes, Rose’s age makes her a non-option as a romantic partner. But what about ten years from now?

For a moment, I imagined a beautiful, grown-up Princess Rosemary standing next to Leonhart. They didn’t seem out of place. Anything but, really. The image would have been perfect as a painting.

Ah, I see. It might be dangerous to assume that my little sister marrying some man is a possibility only for the far-distant future. The time might come faster than I initially expected.

Who’s to say her newfound first crush on Leonhart will never be anything more?

I glared at the man standing next to me as bitter feelings took hold.

“You’re not having her,” I whispered quietly.

Leonhart’s sharp eyes shot open.

The Reincarnated Princess Practices Avoidance

This happened a few days after my surprise encounter with the guard captain, Sir Leonhart.

Since our chance meeting, I'd spent all of my time studying quietly. I had thought that it was time to ramp up my self-improvement plan, since I'd already managed to stumble across my dream man. I needed to put my best foot forward—after all, I'd showcased the worst side of myself by publicly scolding my little brother.

I had extra time for my studies anyway, because I would have to temporarily halt flag-breaking until the other suitor characters started to assemble at the palace.

I really hope that I can live in peace for a few years before the sorcerers and the priest turn up.

Johan was developing rapidly under Chris's training regime. He had grown a bit, but the biggest difference showed in his facial features; his expressions had started to take on a gallant vibe, which almost made me doubt whether he was the same spoiled crybaby who, until very recently, had refused to leave my shadow.

By all reports, George was also shaping up nicely, and he had the joint help of his father and uncle. I still occasionally visited Emma, and she loved to keep me up-to-date with news of how George was growing up. He was no longer Emma's doppelganger, and his face was looking a lot more boyish, apparently. Emma had laughed and told me that George would have the means to support a family, even if the Eigels fell into ruin, because in addition to lessons on manners and swordplay, Julius had been drilling the basics of business into him.

Fall into ruin? I'm pretty sure that's not the sort of thing the wife of a marquis should be joking about.

Ignoring Emma's loose lips for a moment, I figured that, as long as the two boys matured into normal adults, two of the flags from Rosemary's storyline

would be broken.

Even if the protagonist, the shrine maiden, didn't choose either of those suitors, I wouldn't need to worry about lifelong confinement with Johan. I wouldn't have to enter a loveless marriage with George either.

All right, we're getting there! I'd thought naively, back before I'd known any better.

I heaved a silent sigh with a faraway look in my eyes. At this point, I was studying in my room. My reading material was a history book that my teacher had assigned me for homework. I was slogging through it with a dictionary in hand, so that I could understand the many old-fashioned turns of phrase in the text, but I couldn't focus at all.

How could I?

The root of my concentration difficulties was staring at me. I could feel the hard gaze boring a hole in my back. It had been like this for quite some time now, so I couldn't just pretend that I was being self-conscious. He *was* looking at me.

He's staring right at me.

I hazarded a peek at him for a moment over the top of the book. His eyes caught mine.

At least try to hide it!

Twinges of pain rippled through my stomach. My nerves were getting to me.

The man who was responsible for the last few days of continual discomfort was my personal guard, Klaus von Behlmer. To get right out with it, he was one of *Hidden World's* suitor characters. The masochistic guard.

Some of you may be wondering why I wasn't trying to break his flag, despite him being so close to me. I had my reasons—an important condition for dismantling his flag was that Rosemary needed to refrain from initiating contact with him.

Klaus was, at present, eighteen years old. He had close-cut, dark-brown hair, and chiseled facial features. His dark-green eyes were gently sloping in an

inverse proportion to his imposing eyebrows. He had a supple, well-built body, though he was not muscular to the point of burliness. His knight's uniform was predominantly black; gold lines ran through the seams, the stand-up collar, the cuffs, and the long shirttail. Also on his collar was the coat of arms for the royal guard—a shining shield-shaped emblem of a winged lion.

I'd heard that his boyish smile was a hit with the young mademoiselles. He definitely had the air of an easygoing sportsman type, or as we would say in modern Japan, the type of person who looks at home with a bottle of club soda.

He'd been assigned as Rosemary's guard a little over a year ago, but unfortunately by this point, his fetish for masochism was already present.

Klaus was born the second son of a count, and he had a free-spirited older brother. The brother's devil-may-care attitude was a far cry from his serious parents, and he often toyed with his surroundings, having no awareness of the consequences of his actions.

Klaus continuously paid the price for his sibling's rebelliousness. Klaus's mother and father subjected him to stricter parenting in order to prevent him from taking after his brother. Thanks to that, Klaus grew up to be a perfectionist, and practically flawless in all of his ventures.

However adroit he may have been though, failures were inevitable. To err is to be human, after all. But Klaus never could shrug his mistakes off just like that; even now, he often lambasted himself way more than was necessary for minor errors. He'd criticized himself over and over until, at some point, he'd begun to desire the presence of someone to scorn and detest him.

I don't understand the psychological mechanisms behind masochism, but in his case, his perfectionism probably opened the first cracks to this nature. I suppose that he craved punishment for his failure to be flawless.

Klaus had enlisted in Nevel's knightly order when his parents had refocused their attention on their oldest son, whose rough edges had softened with the passage of time. A few years after joining on as a knight, Klaus had become Rosemary's personal guard.

Basically, there was nothing I could do to dismantle Klaus's masochism flag. I'd wanted to break it early somehow, out of consideration for the yet-to-arrive

shrine maiden, but unfortunately, I would've needed to be born a few years earlier, before Klaus's masochistic tendencies set in.

It's better to face reality and give up for now.

Besides, there was a different, more important flag that I was determined to avoid: the flag which triggered the beginning of a twisted master-servant relationship between Rosemary and Klaus.

In every route of *Hidden World*, Rosemary von Velfalt fell in love with Klaus.

Let me be clear, though. I don't mean that *I* was head-over-heels. Rather, the Princess Rosemary from *Hidden World* always swooned for him.

One could say that it was inevitable—a young girl of that age would obviously take an interest in the handsome guard who'd been by her side since she was a child. Rosemary nurtured her love, which was not unlike admiration, in secret. She revealed her feelings to no one. For his part, Klaus treasured Rosemary like a sister; while he had no romantic feelings for her, he took immense care to protect her.

All of that had come crashing down on a certain day, right after *Hidden World's* Rosemary had turned thirteen.

She'd caught an accidental glimpse of an argument between Klaus and an older maid. They were skulking out of sight, perhaps because they were breaking up or something.

Just when Rosemary popped out of her room to summon Klaus for a trip outside, the echoing sound of a slap caused her to stop dead. She tiptoed over to where the sound had come from, and stole a peek.

She found Klaus, the man she was after, together with a maid. His cheek was bright red, and the maid had grabbed him.

Rosemary's first instinct was to jump to Klaus's aid, but she froze when she overheard their conversation.

"You think you can get by without me?! Tell me—who else can make you hurt like I can? Will you ever be satisfied with a normal woman?"

The maid's questions stupefied Rosemary.

Her words were an absolute mystery. A little girl of thirteen had no basis for understanding why anyone would keep someone close, just for the express purpose of inflicting pain upon them.

But far from arguing back, Klaus was letting her do whatever she wanted. His body shook as though he were intoxicated, and the cheek that she hadn't touched was the same shade of red as the one she'd slapped. His deep green eyes melted.

When at last he blurted out, "More!" followed by a fiery moan, I'd screamed at the game on the television, "*What the fuck are you letting innocent Princess Rosemary witness?!*"

At the time, I'd ground my teeth and thought, *If only I could jump through the screen, I'd shield Rosemary's eyes and ears, shove her back into her room, and then forcibly remove these freaks!*

And it's just my luck—now, I've wound up on the other side of Hidden World's screen. I couldn't save her back then, but now that I'm Rosemary, there's absolutely no point in trying.

Another one of life's curveballs.

Because *Hidden World's* Rosemary had nobody around to shield her eyes and ears, she'd set her anguished mind in motion. As a result of her ruminations, she'd realized that violence might be the key to winning Klaus's heart.

Holy shit, Princess. It takes a special person to A) continue liking someone after they played out a masochistic freak show before your eyes, and B) try and tailor yourself to this weird fetish.

Rosemary must've summoned a huge amount of courage to suddenly act violently towards Klaus, who'd been like her own sibling and was always by her side. Though trembling, Rosemary had struck Klaus's cheek. She'd forced the astonished Klaus to his knees, looked down at him, and spoke.

"Klaus. So it turns out that you're nothing but a filthy dog."

I'll say it again. Holy shit, Princess.

Rosemary had played the archetypal princess on instinct alone. Nobody

could've taught her that behavior.

She's not my idol!!! I don't want to be her!!!

"L-Lady Rosemary, I...I was—"

"Quiet!" She'd interrupted Klaus's frantic excuses with another open-handed slap. "How dare a dog like you say my name?" By all appearances, it seemed that Rosemary had unearthed a new fetish of her own.

"You call me *mistress*, got it? Puppy?"

This was the turning point moment where the sadistic princess had burst onto the stage. From then on, Rosemary and Klaus discarded their sweet, sibling-like relationship and replaced it with something way less innocent—a mistress and a servant, united through a twisted bond of power-play.

On a personal note, when playing through *Hidden World*, I'd shipped this mistress-servant pairing. Whatever commentary anyone else had, I'd felt like they were made for each other. Someone once said that every Jack had his Jill, and to me, this had seemed like a perfect example.

My thought process at the time had been this: as long as both of them were happy, it was a fine dynamic. However, Klaus inevitably regretted leading the princess astray, as he'd initially treated her like a sister. His guilt became the entry point for *Hidden World's* heroine, the shrine maiden, to progress down Klaus's game route. While playing the game, it had been tough to watch the wretched state that befell Rosemary after Klaus and the shrine maiden became a couple.

But now, I'm fully behind the pairing of Klaus and the shrine maiden.

Come on, get over here, shrine maiden! I refuse to become a sadistic princess! While I'm at it, I promise that, from now until the end of time, I will never fall in love with Klaus.

That was precisely why I hadn't thus far disturbed our harmless relationship. His sexual interests never detracted from his talent and superiority as a guard. All I had to do was build a satisfactory, professional relationship with him, while simultaneously taking the utmost care to stay clear of his dark side.

Besides, if *Hidden World's* Rosemary hadn't confronted him about it, Klaus would have preferred to keep his masochism a secret. Thus, it was best for both of us moving forward to keep our relationship at the semi-sibling stage.

At least, that had been my plan.

So why does this guy have his eyeballs glued to me?!

He was an easygoing nice guy until just a few days ago! We'd kept the ideal distance between us! Nothing at all has happened that would suddenly change Klaus's attitude. Why the hell is he looking at me with such passion all of a sudden?

I kept quiet.

Calm down. Pull yourself together, Rosemary. It's not yet confirmed that Klaus has developed a thing for me. There must be some reason for his unusual attentiveness. I bet he's just staring because I have bedhead, or maybe there's some lint, or breadcrumbs, or something else in my hair!

I'm sure that's all it is. Please, let that be the case!

"Klaus?" I made up my mind and called out to him.

For a moment he gasped, but shortly after, he hardened his facial features and replied, "Yes?!" He now wore a manly expression, and it didn't betray even the slightest hint that he might have any particular sexual perversion.

I gulped, then took a deep breath.

"Is there something in my hair?" I asked, not wanting to beat around the bush. I couldn't let this stalemate last any longer.

I wanted out of this gut-wrenching situation.

Klaus, I won't be upset. Just hurry up and tell me what's in my hair! What is it? Breadcrumbs? Lint? Perhaps a misplaced snack, an imo-kempi?

He said nothing in response, and our eyes remained locked together. This staring contest was the last thing I wanted to be doing, but breaking eye contact would have seemed unnatural. I waited for him, taking care to maintain a normal facial expression.

After a few seconds—or a few dozen, I wasn't sure anymore—of grave silence had wracked my nerves even further, Klaus finally opened his mouth.

“No,” Klaus replied with a nervous look on his face. He then hung his head and broke our eye contact.

Oh, great! There's nothing there! I thought sarcastically. *Then don't leave me waiting for your answer, asshole!*

His cheeks seemed to be a little flushed, but that was probably just my imagination.

The weather's nice today, so he could be a bit hot. Yeah, that must be it.

“If that's so, then pay more attention to our surroundings. There's more to being a guard than just keeping an eye on your charge.”

“Yes!” Klaus answered my reprimand with a bow. His easygoing smile was like salt in my eyes.

Hold on. Why do you look so happy? Stop looking at me like that! And do something about the twinkle in your eyes! What's going on? A little reprimand like that is all it takes to brighten your day?!

I'm trying to subtly tell you to stop staring! I screamed in my mind, while keeping my expression deadpan.

I just couldn't understand this person; the way his mind worked was an enigma. I stood there in silent turmoil.

I'm a little girl with zero understanding of guard duties or combat, so why does he look so pleased to hear my critiques of his job? What's that about? If scolding him and punching him are not going to work, then what options do I have left? Should I come at this from another angle and try flattery instead? Should I pat his head? Kill him with compliments?

I felt like I was confronting a rabid beast or an alien life-form on the other side of my desk. The air between us was thick with tension; one misstep and it would be checkmate. A cold sweat had begun to build behind my neck and in my fists, which were clenched under the table.

In the end, what I did next was— “I'm off to the library.”

—flee.

Go ahead. Laugh at me for deserting in the face of the enemy.

But my nerves can't take any more of this place! There are maids on all sides of us watching anxiously, and I don't even know what to say about Klaus.

I just want to study in peace!

I gathered my assigned reading and my dictionary, then made a hasty exit. I breathed a small sigh of relief, but a few seconds later, I realized that the peril I'd thought I was escaping had not gone anywhere.

"Allow me to escort you," said Klaus.

I stayed silent in response.

Yep. That figures. Ah ha ha.

Why would he follow me? He's only, oh I don't know, my personal guard!!!

God, I'm such an idiot.

I walked down the hall, downcast, followed by a pervert—by which I mean, Klaus. I was sulking at this point and ready to throw in the towel, but I stopped in my tracks when something through the hall window caught my eye.

Below me were the sparring grounds, and again today, Johan was putting his best foot forward in training with Chris. Johan was still a full head shorter than Chris, so when he stood next to the giant that was Sir Leonhart, my little brother seemed like a dwarf out of a fairy tale. My stomach churned with the thought that he might be trampled.

Perhaps because of how inseparable we'd been, I still hadn't come to grips with the distance that now existed between Johan and me. A slight feeling of loneliness came over me when I realized that I could no longer help him up if he stumbled.

No, no, no. This is what I wanted, so no whining allowed. Even if Johan resents me for it, I'll take his bitter attitude as a consequence of my own choices.

I turned away from looking at Johan and the others, and just as I was about to walk away, a feeling of being watched prompted me to lift my head. My eyes

met Klaus's. For some reason, he was giving me an uncomfortably warm look.

What's with the strange, kind look on your face? I don't want your pity. Even a princess has the right to look lonely now and then.

"What?" I asked, with a threatening, icy glare.

Klaus made no effort to hide his smile, or his friendly expression.

"Lady Rosemary, you're a kind soul," he said, showing me the easygoing grin that was so popular among the mademoiselles.

Klaus, what brought this gentleness on? Actually, you were there the other day when I shouted at Johan, right? If I remember correctly, you looked pretty appalled, so what are you even talking about?

"Spare me the flattery," I said, shooting a suspicious glance at Klaus before walking away. I was aware that I was giving Klaus the cold shoulder, but I had no idea where his landmines were planted, so I had to tread carefully.

Even so, Klaus followed behind me and kept talking, not the least bit discouraged.

Wow, you can take a beating!

"I mean it!" he protested.

"Oh, really?" I responded.

"I have only been in your service for one year and eighteen days—"

That's pretty specific.

"—and four and a half hours, roughly."

Way too specific! You're gonna give me nightmares!!!

Klaus continued, "But I have come to learn that your heart is a thing of beauty. You pay attention to the needs of those around you. Though you try to hide your feelings, you worry for them."

The shock of his overly specific stalker-like observations had distracted me, so I'd been half-ignoring what he'd said after them. However, I couldn't let these remarks slip past.

I'm not following your train of logic, Klaus—do sisters who chastise their brothers in front of everyone appear as considerate angels to people with your particular disposition?

You've earned another notch on the creepometer.

"Y-You're overestimating me," I stuttered from agitation.

Let me be clear: my indignation didn't stem from the bittersweet feelings of a young girl who was shy after being complimented. I was just scared.

You're creeping me out. Please, Klaus, don't drag me down to your shady level!

"I'm not!" argued Klaus.

Even after my direct disagreement, my personal guard had failed to take the hint. He gave a boisterous shout of denial. Fear prevented me from looking back at him, but I was sure he was beaming from ear to ear.

Please, just read the room. I know that my face has lost all color and my voice is quivering to boot. Anyone can see that this isn't shyness, so please, Klaus, just notice that.

"When you scolded master Johan, it was precisely because you were looking out for him! You know that when someone is truly dear to you, there are times when you mustn't spare the rod."

"Klaus, enough."

"And oh, the sight of you at that time!" he continued, seemingly oblivious, "So gallant, so beautiful!"

Shut up, I said! Listen! Please, just listen!

Let my heart's voice reach him!!!

"And with that, my last doubt vanished," said Klaus. "You are more than just a cute young princess."

Something's wrong.

A chill ran up my back, and an ominous foreboding washed over me. I stopped and turned around. Klaus was looking straight at me with a horribly serious

expression. I inadvertently gulped at the dazzling passion in his eyes. The dread had reached its peak. Mental alarm bells rose to a crescendo.



“Miss Rosemary, *you* are what I’ve been after, my mistre—”

“Klaus!” I exclaimed, cutting him off.

Shock showed on Klaus’s face because I hardly ever raised my voice, but I had bigger worries than breaking character. I’d rip off the sheep’s clothing I’d meticulously constructed in a heartbeat if it meant that I could crush his terrifying flag.

Because, oh my God, he was about to say “mistress”!

In the scene when Klaus had pledged total submission to Rosemary, he’d stopped calling her “Lady Rosemary” and had started calling her “mistress.” That word called to mind the shady master-servant relationship from *Hidden World*; its usage was one of my triggers, and set my alarm bells ringing.

I spoke, and my voice was subdued.

“You should watch what you say.”

I felt like the slightest lapse in my concentration would leave my voice and my body shaking. I wanted nothing more than to be anywhere else.

I can’t understand this guy. Why’s he raising his own flag when I haven’t taken any action? Why’s he falling in love on his own? I’d say he was a pushover, but this is just scary.

How am I supposed to dodge unavoidable events?

“Your master is my father, and my father alone. Not me,” I clarified.

Klaus was silent, but his furrowed brows and the desperate look of his pursed lips communicated his objection in volumes.

Hey, don’t look so disappointed. Please, listen to me.

Oh, and keep your distance.

“On my father’s orders, you’ve been turned into the babysitter for a princess of tender age. Nothing more.”

“That’s not—”

“I won’t ask any more of you than that.” I interrupted Klaus’s desperate

attempt to argue and continued, “So that’s how you should see your role as well.”

“But Lady Rosemary!”

Klaus moved a step closer to me, probably irritated by my stubborn attitude.

I, on the other hand, wanted to get further away. Strength of willpower kept me where I stood, but I flinched when he took yet another step.

Wait—whoa now. Let’s take a minute to calm down. Oh God, stay back!

“You’ve made it clear to me that you are sincere about your service,” I explained, “but words can take different forms in the ears of different listeners. Even if you have no ill intentions, a listener’s malice can morph your words’ meaning in a hundred different ways.”

“Ah!” Klaus’s eyes widened in shock. Then, his face tensed up.

“I understand that you have pledged your loyalty to the king. Because of that loyalty, you devote yourself to me as well. For that reason, you should closely guard what you say.” I relayed my feelings in a gentle but deliberate tone.

“Lady Rosemary...” Klaus lowered his eyebrows and looked down.

Wow, it’s going great. I think I’ve managed to convince him.

On the surface, I was saying, “Refrain from remarks that will cause others to question your loyalties,” but deep down, I was trying to convey the sentiment “Don’t call me ‘mistress’!”

My conscience winced a little at the sight of him acting like a scorned puppy, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

“Do you understand?” I pressed one last time, staring intently at Klaus, who had fallen silent. My face looked calm, but my inner self was drenched in cold sweat.

Phew, just dodged a bullet there. You can count me out of any more exchanges like this. I swear they’ll give me a heart attack.

I set off walking again, and pretended not to notice Klaus’s expression. He seemed like he wanted to say something more.

The Distress of the Reincarnated Princess On one day in my life as Princess Rosemary, I was sitting in a gently rocking carriage. At the time, I was feeling over the moon for two reasons.

The first reason was also the purpose for my outing today—it was George's ninth birthday.

As cute as it would've been to jump up and down every time a potential fiancé grew a year older, that wasn't the sort of person I was. But this time felt different; George turning nine meant that I had completely broken Emma's death flag, which should have killed her while George was still eight years old.

Emma had been lively and full of smiles again today. Although she'd complained about her recent weight gain, she'd been a picture of happiness while we'd shared tea.

I'm so glad. I really am!

The memory brought a smile to my lips. I sensed a chuckle emanating from the other passenger in the carriage. I looked his way, and my gaze locked onto his eyes, which were narrowed gently. He cast his expression downwards and bowed his head, although he didn't appear to feel guilty.

"Forgive me."

"Not at all," I said sincerely.

I wasn't angry at being laughed at. Or rather, I could tell from the way he'd smiled that he wasn't making fun of me. It just seemed odd. What exactly had I done to make him laugh?

When I shook my head, confused, he continued as though he had read my mind.

"You were smiling so happily, I couldn't help but join in," he whispered with a hint of mischief in his eyes. His gaze was too kind for me to look at directly, so I turned my face down. Even without being able to see myself, I could tell that I

was blushing.

I can't help it. I love him. Of course I'm going to go red when the love of my life smiles at me so kindly. I'm no match for Sir Leonhart; he could've wrapped me around his little finger any day.

While looking down, I took the opportunity to casually fix my dress.

I hope it doesn't look weird.

I wore a sky-blue dress, with intricate and almost transparent Mechlin lace accents decorating the collar and the cuffs, the sleeves extended just to the length of my elbows. I'd chosen silk for the fabric, as velvet would have looked too heavy for the dress style. The décolleté design on the gown was currently in fashion, and was extremely low-cut. I wasn't, however, confident that I could endure the penance of drawing attention to my flat chest, so I disguised the lack of volume with a rose-themed accessory. Due to the pannier I wore underneath, my skirt flowed out in a gentle curve.

For the first time in my royal life, I'd struggled to decide what to wear. I'd checked myself in the mirror countless times, and each time I'd worried about whether I should choose a different outfit.

This is the uncertain feeling that women endure each time they go on a date, I thought, strangely moved.

Not that I'm on a date. I'm just getting carried away all by myself!

"Will you forgive my discourtesy?"

I was fully enjoying being a girl in love, but Sir Leonhart's voice brought me back to reality. I promptly raised my head, but was unable to look directly at his smile. I gave my reply with a gaze that was tilted slightly down.

"O-Of course." I stopped speaking for a moment after stuttering, but managed to compose myself. After mentally reiterating that I should try to act calm, I let out a little puff of breath and continued, "If anything, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm terribly sorry for making you accompany me on my personal business today."

"Please, there is no need to apologize," said Sir Leonhart good-naturedly.

“But...”

“This is my job,” he continued. “I beg you—do not fret over it.”

It's his job. That's exactly right.

There's no way that he'd have any ulterior reason for chaperoning me. I chastised myself for almost slipping into depression, because I'd known his motives all along. *I should be happy just to be with him, like I am now,* I told myself.

Back to the point at hand—I'm sure you've guessed the second reason why I was full of smiles. My guard for the day was Sir Leonhart.

Usually, guarding me was Klaus's job. But thankfully—*ahem*, I meant *regrettably*—Klaus had the day off for family reasons. Apparently, it was his older brother's wedding.

Isn't that wonderful?

“Go on, go on, have a nice trip. Take your time,” I had said without much thought, trying to send him off quickly. He'd hesitated though, because I was scheduled to go out on the same day. He wouldn't have minded someone else guarding me if I'd been in the palace, minding my own business, but because I was leaving the castle grounds, he had grumbled.

“You leaving the palace is a different matter. When I consider that you might come under attack on the road, or that something might happen to you, I can't bring myself to leave your side. I don't want to entrust your guard to anyone else unless they're at least as skilled as I am, or even better.”

He'd bemoaned and fretted, on and on.

Of course, he'd said that while fully aware that, in terms of raw skill, he was among the top five knights of the royal guard.

I appreciate the concern, but I feel a sudden need to permanently...dispose of you. It's not easy to deal with stalkers that are skilled.

I guess I'll have to back down, I thought, ready to give up on my chance to see the Eigers.

Klaus shouldn't miss his big brother's wedding for my sake, as celebrations like

that don't happen very often. I'd also wanted to be there myself to witness Emma's death flag finally break, but with Klaus being so stubborn, there was nothing I could do to obtain both outcomes.

However, somebody noticed my displeasure and put himself forward—Sir Leonhart. Even Klaus couldn't deny the kingdom's finest swordsman. Reluctantly, Klaus left for his family's home, and Sir Leonhart set to guarding me on my visit to the Eigels.

I feel guilty for burdening Sir Leonhart, I really do, but I also want to say this: Nicely done, Klaus. Good job! And thank you too, Klaus's brother, for sharing a portion of your happiness with me.

"Besides," Sir Leonhart started, while I was treating Klaus to a rare compliment in my thoughts. He paused for a moment.

"Hmm?" I raised my head to see what the matter was. He smiled when our eyes met.

"No man would ever complain about being assigned to guard such a beautiful princess," Sir Leonhart continued.

"Ah!" S-So pretentious. But also cool.

Although he wasn't exactly stone-faced, something about Sir Leonhart made it hard for people to approach him. A single smile from him was immeasurably effective. He, like several other side characters in *Hidden World*, possessed a healthy amount of gap moe. There was no doubt that a fond look from him could leave any woman swooning.

I'd fallen for him ages ago, so that point should be obvious.

If someone declared "Sir Leonhart can get away with anything and you'll still love him," I wouldn't be able to argue the point. Everything he does is cool. I'd probably still adore him even if he didn't act how I wanted him to. I know that if Klaus had given me the same compliment, I'd have definitely just ignored him.

"I must give Klaus my thanks. He ought to have arrived at his family's home by now. I can just imagine the disappointment on his face," Sir Leonhart said with a playful chuckle. His words pulled me a few inches back to reality.

I can picture his downtrodden look too. I'm definitely not excited about going home.

I wasn't an overly expressive person, so I was sure that, in the moment, none of my inner thoughts showed on my face. But Sir Leonhart excelled at reading people's facial expressions. He pursed his lips, acutely grasping that the memory of Klaus had dampened my spirit.

"Has Klaus done anything to trouble you?" he queried.

"What are you asking?" I countered.

The unexpected change in the conversation left me shocked.

"Exactly what it sounds like." His tone was soft, and his eyes gentle.

I couldn't sense any ulterior motive, but trying to discern the intention behind his words would have been impossible for me anyway, given the vast difference in our experience points.

Just what could he mean? What truth could he be seeking with his question?

Klaus is indeed troubling me. Like, a lot.

I was most grateful when he carried out his duties in silence, but Klaus was prone to sudden bursts of excitability. And for some reason, he would drown me in compliments. It was more than a few times that I'd found myself cringing at his lengthy, overwrought flattery.

Which of your buttons did I press to make this happen, Klaus? I'd think, while very close to my wits' end.

He loved it when I glared at him, so I tried to interact with him normally instead, but he loved that too. What was I to do? It was my heartfelt desire for him to reign in his eccentricity a little.

I really doubt that Sir Leonhart's question is about that though. After all, he'd be in a bind if I were to say, "Your subordinate is an off-the-rails pervert. Do something about him!"

I couldn't have said anything like that anyway. It would've been too impure. Not for me, of course, but I didn't want to sully Sir Leonhart with it.

“He’s an excellent guard,” I started, after a short while of hesitation. “I’ve never once doubted his prowess.”

I’m technically not lying. It does feel like I’m dodging the question, but let’s just push through.

“Your Highness?”

Sir Leonhart closed off my escape route. Well, not literally. All he had to do was tilt his head and call out to me.

The reason why I felt like he was reproaching me was entirely because I knew that I was being underhanded. I felt like he was telling me to come clean. A sense of awkwardness came over me and I hung my head. Creases formed on my dress where my hands had gripped the fabric unconsciously.

“It would be a lie to say that he’s never done anything to trouble me,” I confessed between intermittent pauses.

I pointed a fearful look at Sir Leonhart, like a child after a scolding. He didn’t appear to be angry. He said nothing, but his calm gaze urged me to continue.

“He’s a little too forward, or rather, I feel that he’s overprotective,” I said, after a pause.

“Overprotective?” Sir Leonhart repeated what I’d said. His eyes drifted up diagonally, as though he were rummaging through his memories. “I suppose so,” he whispered quietly. It seemed that something had come to his mind.

So he is overprotective. I wasn’t just being too self-conscious. Even a third party could tell that he’s not a normal guard. Well, I should’ve expected so. I’d hate it if there were other guards who not only cling to their charge twenty-four hours a day, but also moan about letting anyone else take over their duties.

Sir Leonhart saw my vacant expression and knitted his eyebrows in a troubled frown.

“I’d prefer to quell any misapprehensions that you might have. Klaus is usually devoted to his duties. Despite his cheerful personality, he is a man capable of making level-headed decisions without being swayed by his personal feelings.”

Hearing Sir Leonhart’s appraisal of Klaus left me stumped as to whether we

were talking about the same person. At the same time, however, there were parts which I could understand. It had a nice ring to it to call him “decisive”; Klaus had the ability to draw a clear line between those he considered important to him and those he didn’t.

The man does occasionally have a weirdly businesslike side to him.

“Some members of the royal guard have difficulty remaining emotionally detached from their charges. They’re only human, so it may be inevitable to develop a bond with someone they spend so much time with. I had assumed that Klaus wasn’t among their number,” Sir Leonhart said, before looking my way and adding, “Or, he didn’t used to be, anyway.”

I know you’re implying that he’s changed now, and I want you to stop. While we’re at it, I’d rather if you dropped the warm look in your eyes. It’s uncomfortable.

“When Klaus talks of you, he’s like an entirely different person. So full of energy,” said Sir Leonhart.

“T-The two of you talk about me?” I asked, praying to hear a denial. To my horror, Sir Leonhart returned a smile and a nod.

Hold on!

What the fuck, Klaus?

How dare you talk about me! To Sir Leonhart, of all people!

“He was full of joy when he told me that you’re a wonderful person. That you’re intelligent and pure of heart.” Sir Leonhart said this as though recounting a jubilant experience, but despair gripped me. I wasn’t the least bit happy.

I wanted nothing more than to grab Klaus by the collar and shake him until he told me why he was acting like a grandfather boasting about his first grandchild.

“I won’t ask you to forgive him. He blundered by making you feel suffocated. However, I’d like you to bear something in mind, if only a little: his overprotectiveness is a manifestation of his care for you.”

I sat in stunned silence.

He’s trying to calm me down. That’s the impression I received.

Though Sir Leonhart's words were an apologetic admission of Klaus's issue, they also seemed like an excuse. Hearing him voice that sentiment was unsatisfying; I felt like it was an opinion drawn from feelings of support for Klaus, and was intended to cover for Klaus's unsettling behavior.

Feeling uncomfortable, I took advantage of a jolt to the carriage to look away from Sir Leonhart.

It's not like he's criticizing me, so why do I feel a bit annoyed?

"I admit that I'm weak." Before I could stop myself, I was blurting out an almost spiteful counterargument. "I'm fragile enough that anyone guarding me would rest easier if they could just shove me into a box. But I'm a person too. I have a will of my own. Locking me away is about the furthest thing from caring that I can think of."

My emotions had risen to the surface. Sir Leonhart deepened his strained smile without taking his eyes off me as I ranted. A modicum of composure returned to me after noticing that Sir Leonhart was watching me like I was a child throwing a tantrum.

Taking my anger out on someone who has nothing to do with this. How embarrassing. How old am I?

"You're not weak at all," Sir Leonhart said.

"Huh?" I asked, confused.

"Klaus isn't so easily won over. He wouldn't swear loyalty to a princess who's frail and beautiful, but nothing more."

I was dumbstruck, and Sir Leonhart peered at me. His smile vanished, and a trace of mellowness accompanied his low voice. "In your eyes, he may be just a dog—"

D-Dog? There's an ominous word. I'm not in the habit of keeping adult men as dogs. If I wanted one, I'd rather have a border collie, or maybe a Shetland sheepdog.

"—But his real nature is that of a wolf. He'll sink his teeth into even his superiors if they offend him. Under usual circumstances, he is an untamable

beast.”

I’ll bet that a sadist could tame him, I thought, but kept quiet. It was probably best not to crack that particular joke.

As truth would have it, Klaus’s recent behavior did give me the impression that he wouldn’t settle for just anyone.

As I mentioned earlier, his superior combat abilities placed him among the top five in the royal guard. He’d soared through the ranks of the knights with an almost unbelievable swiftness, earning his position as a princess’s personal guard even at his young age.

Nevel’s knightly order tended to focus on skill rather than social class—this had enabled him to be promoted, despite having only minor noble holdings. Unfortunately, his skill and upbringing made him a frequent target of envy and harassment. As I was a princess, nobody was dumb enough to badger him in my presence, but I knew that they prodded at him behind my back, in secret.

Klaus, however, wasn’t the chill man his appearance made him out to be. He would dodge physical attacks with elegance and repay insults two times over. His thorough reprisals ensured that none of those nasty people would dare to antagonize him again.

In a way, he’s doing a poor job of being a masochist, isn’t he? What sort of masochist is this aggressive? Maybe all this means is that sadism and masochism are two sides of the same coin.

Huh. I’m not sure where I’m going with this.

“A weak person couldn’t hope to tame him, as you have done. I know that you are a proud princess who wants more out of life than to just be protected. But that desire is also what occasionally puts you in harm’s way.”

Harm’s way? So, looking weak isn’t what puts me in danger? I don’t know what he’s trying to say. How could I be in harm’s way if I’m not weak?

Noticing my confusion, Sir Leonhart shot an admonishing look at me.

“Your Highness, you are capable of walking on your own two feet, thinking things through for yourself, and coming to your own decisions. But there is a

limit to what can be achieved by a single person. I beg you to ask for a little more help from those around you.”

“I feel like I do already.” I blinked a few times, stunned by Sir Leonhart’s unexpected warning.

There were only a handful of things I could do entirely by myself. I knew that, and I believed that I did ask others for help.

Like today. I’m making Sir Leonhart act as my guard even while knowing that I’m being selfish.

But he saw things differently, apparently. Sir Leonhart shook his head.

“You need to ask more. You don’t ask nearly enough. Klaus is overprotective precisely because he thinks the same way that I do about this.”

Despite his pleading, I wasn’t able to just nod and say that I understood. Not even for Sir Leonhart. Part of the reason was because I needed to remember my position as princess. My status didn’t allow me to parade my weaknesses in front of everyone.

But the bigger reason was that I had trouble gauging how much was safe to explain.

How much could I rely on others? I knew about future events which hadn’t yet taken place, but who in the world could I explain that to?

I looked down with a stubborn attitude, causing Sir Leonhart to flex a troubled smile.

“I just ask that you remember what I’ve said.”

The day would come when I would recall this statement coming out of his mouth with a bitter tone. At that point I would truly understand what he’d meant.

But that part of the story is still several years in the future.

The Sentimentality of the Reincarnated Princess

On one particular day, I'd spent the whole afternoon in my room. I ceased stitching on the embroidery pattern that I'd been working on, and raised my head to the window.

Black clouds had, at some point, blanketed the sky, which had been relatively clear until just past noon. Although it was only a little after three o'clock, the area was as dim as dusk, and the air felt heavy with humidity.

I let out a sigh, expressing my melancholy at the impending promise of a storm. I liked the sound of rain, but the humidity wasn't a welcome guest. I found the air unpleasant when it clung to my skin, but the worst part was that it made a frizzy mess of my hair. Hairstyle worries during the rainy season might just be the inescapable fate of women with curls.

I placed the embroidery frame, which held a handkerchief in place for needlework, down on the table, and used my hand to smooth the frizzy expansion of my hair.

Embroidery was one of the essential skills in the education of girls from royal and noble families. It wasn't exactly my forte though; if I were to continue my practice in this dark room, the stitches destined for the handkerchief would become pinpricks on my fingers instead.

I think I'll call it quits for today and find something else to do.

I got up from the sofa where I had been sitting and approached the bookcase, which stood in the corner of the room. Unlike the bookcase in my older brother's room, which was large and practical, the one in my room was a small and ostentatious thing, with carvings of plants decorating all sides of the frame.

Since I was still petite at nine years old, I appreciated that the bookcase was short enough for me to reach any shelf by just stretching my arms. However, I really wanted a set of shelves that I could stuff many more books onto. Besides,

I didn't see the need for a bookcase to be designed so gaudily.

If I were to take up an entire wall, how many bookcases, which were each roughly six square feet, could I add to the space? I would want the volumes of books to be split up by category, so I'd need at least two, no, three bookcases.

While I was thinking, I reached out my hand to the shelf. The book that I pulled by chance was a fairy tale, with a cover in faded red. In its center was a depiction of two young children, a boy and a girl, holding hands. The paper was discolored, and the corners of the cover were worn. It looked a little damaged.

This book had come in handy when I'd been learning to read and write, and when I was younger, I'd often read it to Johan.

I opened the book with a sense of nostalgia. The story was a little tale of adventure undertaken by a young girl and her little brother as they traveled home after losing their way. At one point, the two characters gave candy to a hungry fairy so that it would guide their way. There was also a game of riddles with a talking cat, and a search for a bride for a monstrous frog.

The story was written more for girls' interests, and since he was a boy, I'd thought that Johan might've not been receptive. But this was the book that Johan always chose before his afternoon nap. Whenever the sister in the story found herself in a pinch, Johan's little hands would grip the sleeves of my clothes. I'd found it ever so cute.

"Don't worry, sister. I'll protect you," Johan would call out to me desperately, with his sweet, lispy voice. I could have mistaken him for an angel.

Johan veered into becoming a yandere at some point along the way. I've been so wrapped up with measures to counter his obsessive behavior that I almost forgot about my own strong feelings of affection for him, as well as my brocon tendencies.

The memory brought a self-deprecating smile to my lips.

Johan was growing up splendidly and I was certain that entrusting him to Chris wasn't a mistake. I'd also understood that once his education began in earnest and he left my side, we would have few opportunities to meet, even though we lived in the same palace. Henceforth, the gulf between us would

only grow larger—both the physical gulf and the emotional one.

I chose to walk this path and I have no regrets. Even so, I have an ever-so-slight feeling of loneliness. I'm just feeling selfish.

“Lady Rosemary,” Klaus called out to me. His voice dragged me back to reality, away from the solemn thoughts that I’d become caught in.

I closed the fairy tale book and looked over to the entrance of the room.

“You have a visitor,” he said.

“Who is it?” I asked, confused. I hadn’t expected any visitors. Moreover, I could only imagine that it was someone who knew me well. After all, they’d come straight to my bedroom rather than my living room.

“Sister, it’s me.”

I held my breath and my eyes shot wide open. The voice from beyond the doorway sounded more mature than the one I remembered. His relaxed tone was elegant and just a little deeper. Even so, there was no way that I could mistake my little brother’s voice.

“Johan.”

You couldn’t have been more timely.

What were the chances that the person who I’d been reminiscing about would turn up at this exact moment?

“May I come in?” he asked inquisitively.

“Please do,” I responded after a moment of hesitation.

The door swung wide open.

I gazed at him in wonder once again. I’d expected to see my tiny little brother, with red chubby cheeks, staring up at me with his big round eyes, but that wasn’t quite what I found.

He had golden hair which was like an angel’s halo, and deep-blue eyes that showed glimmers of his intelligence. The plumpness of his cheeks had subsided, giving way to sharp, defined features. While he’d grown taller, he hadn’t grown wider to the same extent. He looked thin, but his upright posture possessed a

beautiful dignity nonetheless.

I'd heard that growing boys would change dramatically if you went a little while without seeing them, and now I believed it. There was some resemblance to the old Johan, but the impression he made had changed so much. I didn't see a single shred left of my spoiled, selfish little brother.

Who is this guy?

"Big sister."

Gently, his sweet, attractive face opened up into a smile. My mind hadn't accepted the reality of his new demeanor when I'd first seen him, but there was only one person in this world who called me "big sister."

"It's been some time, Johan." I looked up at him while putting on a faint smile.

His height had overtaken mine during his time away, but the cheerful smile on his face was exactly the same as when he'd been younger, back when he would chase after me and call out, "Big sister! Big sister!"

"There's something that I'd like to discuss with you. Are you free at the moment?"

"Yes, that's fine. Come on in." I beckoned. "Klaus, could you have the maids fetch some tea for—"

"That's quite all right, Rosie."

I'd turned to Klaus, and was about to ask him to tell the maids to prepare tea for us, but Johan didn't let me finish. I looked up to find a rather serious expression on his face.

"Klaus, I'd like you to leave too," my brother said. "I want to be alone with my sister for a little while."

Klaus squinted his eyes and creased his eyebrows. His expression beat his voice to the refusal. "With all due respect, I am Lady Rosemary's personal guard. My duties forbid me from leaving her side."

This guy won't even budge for a prince, huh. Not pandering to the powerful has a nice ring to it, but God, talk about being reckless. Also, a little bit of me

wishes that Klaus would read the room.

My head started to ache just watching Johan and Klaus glare at each other.

“Klaus.” Exasperated, I signaled with my eyes for Klaus to make himself scarce. Even so, he scrunched up his face in a silent expression of discontent. However, when I voiced the word “please,” he reluctantly retreated.

I offered for Johan to sit on the sofa so as to clear out the odd mood that hung in the air. Johan seated himself opposite to me and hung his head for some time in silence. The room fell quiet, except for the sound of rain and the distant claps of thunder.

Now that I think about it, didn't Johan and I used to sleep together on stormy nights? Neither of us could handle thunder, so we'd pull the blankets over our heads and wait for morning in each other's arms.

I wonder if he can handle thunder now? I thought, looking over to check on him. Johan wore a nostalgic smile as he watched the storm outside.

“Days with thunder are special to me.”

“What?” I tilted my head, unsure what to make of his whisper. Seeing that, Johan turned his gaze to me.

“They are special days when I can sleep next to my big sister,” he continued in a hushed tone, as though letting me in on a secret.

I realized that we'd been reminiscing about the same memory. Maybe this was just a misunderstanding on my part, but it felt like there was a sort of discrepancy in our perception of it.

Sensing my confusion, Johan drooped his eyebrows in a troubled look.

“Back then, for 365 days of the year, the only thought in my mind was how to draw your attention.”

Whoa now, too clingy for me.

I'd known that he was obsessed with me, but learning that I'd been the only thing on his mind all year forced me to accept that I'd underestimated the extent of his obsession.

Johan pursed his lips in a look of self-deprecation. I wasn't sure whether he'd noticed that beneath my expressionless face, I was secretly shuddering.

"I never for a second doubted that, if I could just keep hold of your hand, I would be able to stay forever by your side. What a spoiled and hopelessly foolish child I was."

"Johan?" I asked tentatively.

"I was beyond help because, in my failure to understand my own tininess, I'd mistakenly believed that everything would turn out the way that I'd hoped."

"But that's nothing to fret over," I said. "You were so young."

In response to Johan's argument, which was unusually cynical for his age, I found myself trying to reassure him. Instead of accepting my words, he shook his head with a strained smile.

"When I said 'tiny,' I wasn't only referring to my stature," stated Johan.

"Then what *are* you talking about?" I asked.

"Influence," he responded. "I have no power of my own. I couldn't even compel your guard to move, let alone a country."

I fell into an inadvertent silence.

Uhh, Klaus, you'd better apologize to him.

"If the unthinkable were to happen right now, there'd be nothing I could do to stop it," Johan continued.

"The unthinkable?" I wondered. "Like what?"

"Like..." Johan murmured in a voice too quiet for me to make out.

"Sorry?" I asked him to repeat himself, but he only returned a smile.

"No, it's nothing. There's a limit to what I can achieve on my own. That's why I want to become someone who can support Christoph. Support our country."

His dignified gaze compelled me to stand up straight, almost gasping.

He's grown up so wonderfully in the short time that we've been apart.

His progress pleased me so much that my expression naturally softened. But

what he said next made my face go rigid instead.

“And so,” he said, “I have decided that my first step will be to study abroad in our neighboring country, Vint.”

“W-What?” I stood dumbfounded, while Johan smiled at me.

“I don’t expect to become a first-rate prince while I’m there, but I don’t plan on returning until I can learn to be a little more useful.” Johan stated this with a calm expression, and determination shone in his eyes. There wasn’t an ounce of uncertainty to be found in his face.

“Right,” I commented with a quiet tone of voice.

Johan was no longer the little boy who’d opened his heart only to me. He had set forth on a path which he’d chosen under his own initiative. From the looks of things, he hadn’t needed me to act as his guardian for some time now.

I’m proud of Johan for stepping out of my shadow—that certainly deserves praise. But, is it egotistical to feel a little sentimental at the same time? How pathetic of me. After all that time praying that he’d become more independent, I’m struck with worry the moment he does.

“Take care of your health,” I told him.

“I will.”

“Be sure not to work too hard while you’re on your own,” I continued.

“I won’t.”

“And don’t push yourself too hard.”

Johan nodded at each of my requests. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment, his eyes narrowed, and he let out a hearty laugh.

“I’ll be all right,” he assured me. “You might not know it, but I’m stubborn and can handle things by myself.”

“Really?” I asked.

My strongest mental image of him was as a spoiled crybaby, so I wasn’t sure. I’d inadvertently expressed my doubts, and Johan had nonchalantly replied.

“Really,” Johan asserted. “Though I used to cry a lot when I wanted you to

play with me, they were generally crocodile tears.”

His world-rocking confession, presented like it was nothing at all, stole all words from me.

No way.

“Y-You, uhh, they were crocodile tears?” I sputtered.

“That’s right,” he finished with a nice smile, and I missed my chance to reproach him.

Without an outlet, just where in the world do I direct my rage now?

“So don’t worry about me, and wait for my return,” Johan said with a mature look in his eyes.

Was the revelation about his tears just meant to allay my concerns? It’s getting harder to tell which of us is the older one.

“Take care,” I told him. “I’ll be waiting here for you to come back safe and sound.”

I relaxed my shoulders and put on a smile. Johan squinted his eyes joyfully and nodded.

The Determination of the Second Prince

I concluded my announcement to my sister and left her room, shooting a passing glance at her irksome guard. As I walked down the long corridor, a dazzling flash of lightning shone in through the window. The afterglow of the light burned into my retinas, causing me to squint. After a few seconds of delay, the responding thunder roared. The storm must've drawn quite close to the castle by now, and drops of rain mercilessly thudded against the glass.

There was still half a month before my scheduled departure, but I hadn't expected that there'd be a storm on the day that I told Rosie of my intention to leave. It was almost as though the weather was reflecting my state of mind, which made me feel unpleasant.

Did she buy my lies? Did I manage to look like my heart was leaping with hopes of the future? Maybe she didn't even suspect me. For all her intelligence, she's oddly honest and easy to deceive.

I stifled a laugh while remembering the look on Rosie's face when I revealed that my tears had been fake. She must not have seen that revelation coming at all; she'd opened her eyes so wide that I'd feared they might pop out of her head. Her lips had frozen in their half-open state, and her eyebrows had formed a steep arch.

She was so cute during those rare times when she pulled a silly face.

Noticing eyes on me from the end of the hallway, I silently came to a halt. There were two figures, and the smaller of the two was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Have you finished telling her?" the smaller figure asked. He pushed himself away from the wall, and his platinum hair bounced smoothly with the motion. He raised his head and opened his shining eyes. The pale flashes of lightning were reflected in his faint pupils.

"Yes, Christoph."

One of the people who'd been waiting for me was my half brother. His features looked identical to our father's, but their personalities were nothing

alike. Unlike our father, who had no interest in his family, Christoph was full of kindness and concern towards my sister and me, although it was hard to discern that from his lack of facial expressions.

When I'd first been under his mentorship, I'd bridled at his strict coaching, but Christoph was just as tough on himself as he was on others, if not more. If he gave me one hundred practice swings to do, he'd also do a hundred without any comment. If there was anything I couldn't get right, he'd stick by my side until I could do it.

Moreover, he worked our training time into his ridiculously busy schedule, but he never made me feel like I owed him. I could imagine his cool attitude giving him problems, but I rather liked his awkward and honest way of living; it reminded me of my sister.

Given the differences in our personalities, acting as friends might've been impossible, but in my own way, I respected and idolized Christoph.

"Did Rose cry? How about you spend the rest of the day with her?"

Christoph's words brought an unbidden smile to my lips.

Tough on himself and tough on others, but his little sister's the exception.

"She's not that fragile," I countered.

"Point taken," he replied. Apparently realizing how overbearing his remark had sounded, Christoph's eyes flitted around the room in embarrassment.

He cleared his throat.

Christoph's calm and collected personality was so remarkable for a child his age, and seeing him embarrassed was a vast departure from his usual demeanor. The tall man who was also standing in the hall had slightly softened his expression in reaction to Christoph's floundering.

"No laughing, Leonhart," Christoph complained.

"Forgive me." The man apologized with an expression that was unconcerned, and he didn't look particularly ashamed.

He was Leonhart von Orsein, a knight enlisted in the royal guard, and the one person that I hated more than any other—the man who'd snatched my sister's

attention.

His strong build got on my nerves, as did his towering height and his handsome features, along with everything else about him. I didn't know how to act around him—rather than taking offense when I glared at him, he would look at me with delight.

What pissed me off the most was that I couldn't find anything about him to criticize. I couldn't possibly ask, "*Rosie, how could you love a man like him?*" The only fault I could point to was their age difference.

Damn it.

I couldn't match him in strength, looks, popularity, anything. He far surpassed me in every respect.

"Johan?" Christoph peered at me after I fell silent. "Is something the matter?"

"No."

I exhaled, as though I was letting my gloomy feelings escape my body, and relaxed my fist, which I must have clenched subconsciously. My hands were bigger than before, but still small, too small to stop precious things from slipping through my fingers, however much I tried to hold on.

"Sorry. I got a bit emotional," I said with a hint of self-deprecation.

Christoph furrowed his beautiful eyebrows. At first glance, he might've looked angry, but that wasn't the case. He was probably concerned for me, in his own awkward way.

"It'll be hard parting with Rose," he whispered, his face meek. I found it strange that he didn't phrase his remark as a question, but instead stated it plainly.

"It's a little late for that sentiment," I tried to say with a laugh, but my voice pathetically went hoarse.

Look at how unsightly I am, I thought. I wasn't even strong enough to act normally.

It's hard. Of course it's hard. I'm leaving behind the person that I love the most in this world. Do I really need to say out loud that I'm hurting like my body's

being torn apart?

I want to praise myself for managing to smile at Rosie like it was nothing. My sister is my entire world. She's the mother who'd held me softly in her arms, and the older sister who'd scolded me with love in her heart. At times she'd been the teacher who guides me, and she was also my first love, the person I look up to.

I want to always be by her side, to protect her with my own hands.

I'd believed without any doubt that, if we stayed in our small playhouse, my wish would come true. What a fool I'd been. I'd never even realized that she'd been the one protecting me all along, not the other way around.

My first step outside of our playhouse had taught me about the realities of the world, and how powerless I truly was. The revelation of how insignificant my existence had been left tears of frustration in my eyes.

Christoph called my realization growth, but it didn't feel that way to me. He'd told me that as long as I spent all day dreaming of ideals with no understanding of the real me, I couldn't hope to progress.

In that case, will this pain one day become my strength? Is it fuel to make me strong?

"It's harder than anything. But I've made my decision, so I won't falter any longer," I declared arrogantly.

"All right," Christoph replied with a gentle smile in his eyes.

He might've caught on that my brave face is only a mask, but never mind that.

I stood in front of Christoph with a straight posture. After looking him in the eye, I bowed my head.

"No matter what, I will obtain the strength that I seek and return," I said. "Until then, Christoph, look after our sister."

"Johan."

"I'm not skilled with the sword like Leonhart, and I'm not a leader like you are, but I'll show everyone that I can be a pillar supporting our Kingdom of Nevel in a way unique to me," I declared.

My aim was to master diplomacy: the art of conversation, a quick-witted mind, eyes to assess situations with clarity, and connections with foreign powers. I wanted the means to fight back in case the day ever came when my sister faced the prospect of being used as a political tool.

Rosie was safe at present while our father's interests were directed elsewhere. However, in the not-too-distant future, news of her intelligence would find its way to our father. When that happened, nobody could promise that she wouldn't be sent to another nation and married off as a political pawn. I detested the idea of my sister going to some country to marry, and I'd be lucky if it were a friendly one, like Vint. The thought that her partner might be a prince from a hostile land made my stomach churn.

I won't accept a future where my sister spends her days in tears. She's my one true love. I need her to be happy, more than I do anyone else.

"You've grown up," Christoph said softly under his breath.

I looked up. "Huh?"

"You've come so far from the days when you'd hide behind Rose while glaring at me."

"P-Please forget about that," I stammered. "It was a long time ago."

As the conversation turned to the times when I was a selfish brat, my cheeks grew hot. I recalled the way I'd intimidated those around me out of a desire for my sister's complete attention; the memory made me want to crawl up into a ball and die.

The way I'd hidden behind my weakness and yapped away must've made me harder to deal with than a poorly trained dog.

"I won't forget it," said Christoph. "Your growth—and Rose's—is what keeps me going."

"You know, Christoph, I've thought this for a while, but you'd make a good grandfather," I jabbed sarcastically to vent my frustration.

"I'm well aware that I'm in touch with my older side," Christoph said. He didn't lose his composure. Instead, I was rewarded with a display of his

magnanimity shoved in my face.

He reached out his hand and patted my head as I sulked. His touch seemed inexperienced, but strangely, it didn't feel unpleasant.

"Come home safely."

"No need to tell me," I said, a little peeved at being treated like a child. I brushed Christoph's hand away and put on a fearless smile. "I'm not as much of a weak little child as you and my sister seem to think."

They probably thought that their youngest sibling was just a shy crybaby, but that couldn't have been further from the truth.

One shouldn't judge others based on first impressions, but rather, on how valuable they prove to be. Even if someone constantly got on my nerves, I was prepared to plaster on a smile if I could somehow make use of them.

Crocodile tears were my speciality. I could control my tear glands at will, but in some circumstances, using them in an argument would damage my reputation.

I must carefully choose when to deploy them.

"You've grown up tough," Christoph said. Seeing the mischievous look on my face, he forced a grin.

"Yeah, I can take a lot of punishment," I said, before lowering my tone as though telling a secret. "The truth is, I'm not afraid of thunder."

Christoph tilted his head, puzzled about what I meant.

The Determination of the Reincarnated Princess “Check.”

With a dull thud, the white king’s escape route was blocked. I glared at the board while letting out a groan.

Where now? There must be a maneuver out of this trap somehow.

I rotated the cogs in my brain, but couldn’t find a route to safety. However much I struggled to think my way out of this scenario, it was game over. My feeble ideas weren’t enough to allow my poor king to escape.

I managed to rein in the urge to grind my teeth in frustration, and released all of my irritation as a single sigh.

“You win,” I murmured, after performing the customary gesture of knocking over the white king with my fingertip.

Oh God, this is so annoying!

How many times had my artless strategies forced me to make that gesture? No, I didn’t need to count on my fingers; I remembered how often this had happened. This game marked the thirty-second black cross in my mental records, which noted my unforgettably frustrating count of straight losses.

A stifled laugh reached my ears as I scanned the board to figure out where in the world I’d gone wrong. I slowly raised my head to look at the source of the laughter. Feelings of embarrassment washed over me. There was nothing that I could do to stop the resentful look in my eyes. Was there any loser out there who could’ve stayed in high spirits, even after the victor had laughed at them?

“You’re too cruel, Chris, laughing at me,” I protested.

“Sorry,” Chris said, leisurely narrowing his faint-blue eyes which were framed by large eyelashes. He left a rather mature impression when he laughed out loud.

He’d turned thirteen a few days before, but he didn’t look like a young teenager, not one bit. Deeply reclining into the back of the sofa, with his arms

crossed above his lap, his actions carried a dignity and sex appeal almost unimaginable coming from a teenage boy.

“Your emotions show on your face too easily,” Chris remarked.

“They do?” I gently prodded my cheek with my fingertips.

That’s the first time anyone’s ever said that.

I took after my older brother, whose expressions defaulted to blank. My facial muscles rarely showed up to work. I was thankful for my stoicism whenever I didn’t want people to realize that I was flustered. However, my constant worry was that I’d be cuter as a girl if I were a little more expressive.

“Your frustration is written all over your face,” said Chris.

I said nothing.

“Before I started playing chess with you, I never knew how much you hated losing.”

“But I don’t ever win,” I replied. I turned away in a huff because he’d summed me up perfectly.

He was right about my dislike of losing. Of course I was conscious of that aspect of my personality. I wasn’t fond of conflict, but when I played, I played to win. It didn’t matter whether I was playing my brother, whom I looked up to, or anyone else. I wanted to grind my opponent into the dust.

So what if that lacks charm? Girlishness isn’t going to win me any battles.

“Your play style is too straightforward,” continued Chris. “You should work on your bluffing skills a bit more.”

His point was too sound for me to argue. If ever I detested my beloved older brother, it was during times like these.

Just because he’s a little good-looking—well, very good-looking...okay, so miraculously good-looking that he shines like the sun—he thinks that gives him the right to act all high and...well okay, he doesn’t really do that either.

Chris was a hard worker who didn’t let his handsomeness become a source of arrogance. He was cool, but also doted on his siblings.

Damn it, Chris, it's not fair! You're such a perfect person that I can't even complain about you in my head!

In fact, even the reason he was playing chess against me was altruistic—he was worried about his little sister. He would take time out of his busy schedule to check on me and make sure that I wasn't feeling lonely by myself after Johan's departure to study in Vint last year.

I'll say it again: Damn it, Chris! Acting all cool and kind, who do you think you are? The hero from a shoji manga? A prince? Well, guess what?! You...are.

"I'll devote myself so that one day I can play on even footing with you, Chris," I said. I wasn't taking my loss well and was a little annoyed. Chris reacted by showing me a gentle grin.

"I look forward to that."

This is what I mean. You aren't fair.

I started clearing the pieces away, feeling like I'd lost in more than one way. I'd thought that Chris would've left right away, but he helped me tidy up.

"Don't worry, I'll do this," I said.

"No, there's something I want to talk about." Chris replied in a flat-out refusal.

Talk about what? I thought.

He'd gone out of his way to start this conversation, and the suspense set my nerves to work. I hoped that I hadn't done anything to deserve a reprimand.

"Soon, there will be some sorcerers coming to the palace," Chris told me, looking my way with his usual blank expression.

"Sorcerers?" I repeated Chris's words in amazement.

Does he mean that sorcerer? The suitor character? The necrophile? The source of my trauma?!

My shock was made more severe by my mistaken belief that I'd have several years to prepare for their arrival.

I remembered the illustrations from the sorcerer's bad ending. They replayed

vividly in my mind.

In *Hidden World*, the tragic capstone moment of his bad ending was horrible—the sorcerer had convinced himself that the heroine had betrayed him, so he'd murdered her, then frozen her body in ice. He'd rarely ever looked happy, but at that point in his ending, he'd worn an ecstatic smile. He'd then kissed the ice sculpture that used to be the heroine and had left a parting remark: "You're loveliest when you say nothing."

The illustration of the sorcerer and his mad smile did look beautiful, and was very popular among a small group of fans, but I wasn't having it. After all, that final line was a rejection of the heroine's entire personality; wasn't he saying, in a roundabout way, that he only cared about her looks and her body?

Moreover, the number of bad routes for the sorcerer was unusually high. The slightest misstep resulted in an immediate checkmate. You couldn't distrust him, and you couldn't act scared, but good luck trying to accept him for who he was, because too much affection would set him off too! You had to tread a narrow and arduous path, like walking a tightrope, in order to reach the finish line and unlock his true ending.

I was still scarred by his smile, which would herald the player's entry onto one of the bad routes.

This guy doesn't smile once in his true ending, but he's as chirpy as anything in the bad routes. Creepy.

With a hand on my stomach to ease the sudden onset of sharp pain, I listened to the rest of Chris's announcement.

"To be more specific, they're apprentice sorcerers. Your teacher, Miss Altman, has taken them on as her students. Their names are Lutz and Teo Eilenberg."

Apprentices, huh? Well, I guess they'd have to go with that cover story.

Miss Irene von Altman taught me medicine and astrology, and she was the royal family's court sorcerer. She was a slender beauty of unknown age who possessed a graceful atmosphere. To my eyes, she looked to be in her early twenties, but in one of our conversations, she'd revealed that she was much older than my mother.

And my mother turned thirty a little while ago.

If that's possible, then is everything possible for sorcerers?

I almost wanted to ask, except that the sorcerers in this world weren't quite the same as the mages in fantasy novels. They couldn't summon lightning bolts, or whip up tornadoes, or anything flashy like that. They could borrow the power of the spirits that lived in nature to bring forth water and fire, but only in a feeble way. The fire was, at best, fit for a torch, and the water was just a little spurt from the ground—only a tiny bit of liquid would drizzle through the earth, and it was not even enough to collect into a puddle, or so I'd heard.

However, that small amount of power was precious enough by itself. Most sorcerers found employment as healers or witch doctors or similar, utilizing their green thumbs to study medicines, as they were adept at cultivating flowers and trees. Some also read the currents in the air to forecast the weather.

Yet even as the power of magic faded from this world—and according to some, it was soon to be lost forever—very occasionally a *real* sorcerer would be born. Two of those irregular sorcerers were Lutz and Teo.

Lutz Eilenberg, the sorcerer suitor character, was a once-in-a-lifetime genius who could control ice magic at will. The other one, Teo Eilenberg, was a side character who played a big part in Lutz's route. He was a promising youngster with an affinity for fire magic.

As an aside, although they were both called Eilenberg, they weren't brothers. They'd grown up in the same orphanage, and Eilenberg was the family name of the priest who had raised them.

They would come to the royal palace for observational reasons, and for their own protection. Their existence, and the magnificent power they wielded, was heretical in a world which had all but lost its magic. They faced the danger of stoking fear in the hearts of the common people and ending up as a threat to be destroyed. Nevel's plan was to apprehend them before that happened, teach them the correct way to use their powers, and rear them to be pillars supporting the kingdom.

"You'll be learning under the same teacher, so I expect that you'll have plenty

of occasions to see them. Try your best to get along.”

I found myself at a loss for words when Chris told me to be friendly with them. Recounting the events of *Hidden World*, I felt nothing but terror towards Lutz Eilenberg. Although his mind wouldn't be corrupted yet, his inexperience would surely impact his ability to control his power.

I've even heard that, until he learns the right way to use magic, strong emotions risk causing a spontaneous discharge of his power. To be honest, meeting him fills me with dread, but I have to.

This time, the sorcerers didn't share a direct affiliation with *Hidden World's* Rosemary. Regardless of whether the shrine maiden tried to win over Lutz, Rosemary's future wouldn't change one bit.

However, leaving Lutz to his own devices could, at worst, result in deaths. Even I had too much of a conscience to knowingly ignore that. If I did nothing, I'd have to live the rest of my life in shame.

I have a long life ahead of me, and I don't intend to spend it in penance!

“I will.” I nodded to Chris with a meek look on my face.

The Reincarnated Princess Works Hard

In preparation for the arrival of the two apprentice sorcerers, I was steeling myself for introductions. However, since the pair had not yet learned to control their powers, would I really be allowed to interact with them? As it turned out, my doubts were unfounded—just a few weeks later, I managed to secure an audience, and met them with ease.

I was quite surprised to be around them so soon. I'd imagined that we'd only be allowed to meet after the sorcerers had spent some time learning from Miss Altman. But the reasoning was quickly apparent: the two boys in front of me had chokers fitted around their necks, and I was informed that the chokers were made of a special crystal which had a magic-dampening effect. While worn, the boys couldn't summon more than around thirty percent of their power.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness," said one of the young sorcerers. "My name is Teo Eilenberg, and I'll be studying magic under Miss Irene von Altman."

Teo Eilenberg's most distinguishing features were his fiery-red hair and the mysterious half-red, half-black color of his eyes. His skin was a robust brown, and his stature was much larger than I would've expected for a thirteen-year-old boy. He also possessed a cheerful smile.

For clothes, he wore a white shirt, black pants, and black boots. The black robe he donned over his clothes had an embroidery of gold thread, which was inlaid along the sleeves, hem, and collar. His outfit looked exactly like a sorcerer's should, but to be honest, I'd have sooner believed anyone who told me that he was a soldier.

"I'm Lutz Eilenberg," the other boy muttered.

Lutz Eilenberg had alabaster skin and hair so silver that it was almost white. He was an attractive boy, slender, and with dull-indigo eyes. Unlike Teo, the robes suited him perfectly. Although he should've been the same age as Teo, he seemed to be Teo's complete opposite in more than one way.

At the moment, Lutz was still uncorrupted. Due to being treated like a monster for his powers, he was on the verge of losing his faith in other people—right now though, this only manifested as a little bit of bitterness in his attitude.

All right, let's somehow get this flag broken! I resolved to myself.

This was all well and good, except that Lutz proved to be quite the challenge. I couldn't find a single starting point; there was no opening that I could use to get along with him.

"Hey, Princess! What's this herb good for?"

Teo and I, on the other hand, became friends immediately. Not that I'd expected any less, as he'd been amicable from day one. He opened up to everyone.

At this time, we were in the middle of tending to the medicinal herbs of the palace's greenhouse. While reviewing the various kinds of plants and their effects, Teo would often come over to me and chat. However large his body was, he looked like an excited child when he'd point to an herb and joyfully ask questions. Somehow, that childishness felt to me like it was all calculated; maybe it was like a personal philosophy designed to grease the wheels of his relationships with others.

He was a hard worker with a passion for knowledge. Looking at the way he placed value in communicating with those around him, I expected that he'd go far.

"That's a fever cure for children," I responded to Teo. "I think that you squeeze the juice out and drink it raw."

"Yuck! I bet it's bitter," he replied.

"What can you do? It's medicine." I smiled at Teo as he scrunched up his face.

He turned to the next herb. "What's this one good for?"

"That one stops bleeding. If you decoct the plant before drinking it, it acts on internal disorders. I think that it also works on stomachaches and chills."

"Decoct, then drink," recited Teo. "I'll bet this one's bitter too."

“It’s tasty if you bake it into bread though,” I countered.

“Really? Even though it’s bitter?”

“The bitterness is softened by boiling the herb,” I explained. “If you grind it up and mix it into dough, it takes on a unique flavor. It’s delicious.” Truthfully, the plant with the jagged leaves was mugwort.

It’d be perfect if we had glutinous rice and red adzuki beans, but I haven’t yet found any in this world. I’m holding out hope that Julius will locate some one day.

“Wow, you know everything! I knew you would. I’d love for you to teach me all sorts of things.” Teo shouted over to Lutz, who was watering plants far away from us in the large greenhouse, “Hey, Lutz, get over here! We should have her teach the both of us!”



Lutz turned his eyes towards us once, then looked away. There was no response.

“Oh well,” Teo whispered with a chuckle, not looking particularly offended at having been ignored.

I really was relieved that Teo was here. If I’d been on my own, I doubt that my heart could’ve coped.

“Lutz, might I join you over there?” I asked.

To nobody’s surprise, my offer was met with silence. I shared a stumped look with Teo, shrugged my shoulders, and put on a forced smile.

Unfortunately, the delightful mood in the room was shattered in an instant. I broke out in goosebumps at the sudden murderous feeling emanating from behind us. I whipped around and glared at the source of the miasma, then called his name with a firm voice.

“Klaus!”

“Yes?” Klaus didn’t flinch at all under my glare. He wore an easygoing smile with no trace of guilt.

Why do I feel like this guy’s getting harder to deal with by the day?

“Stop it,” I commanded.

“Why? I can’t stand to watch the insolent way he acts towards you, Lady Rosemary,” Klaus responded.

If you can’t stand, then just sit down! I thought, but I swallowed back the words before they made it past my lips. I released a deep breath instead.

“Just stop it,” I told him in a low tone of voice, and Klaus quickly folded.

“Understood,” he responded, backing down.

I really never know where his buttons are. Could somebody please write and manufacture a user’s manual for Klaus with urgency, and then take him off my hands? I’m afraid that I won’t be accepting any refunds.

“You’re an odd one, Princess,” Teo whispered quietly from my side as I languidly returned to looking after the medicinal herbs.

When I looked at him, I saw that Teo was wearing a rather severe expression.

I'm an odd one? What exactly about me is odd? On the outside I might be a beautiful girl, cast in the mold of my mother, just like in the game—deep down though, I'm just normal with a hint of awkwardness.

"Am I? I think I'm normal, as far as I know," I said with a tilt of my head. Teo narrowed his mysteriously colored eyes and smiled.

"I'm not sure what your definition of 'normal' is, but your guard's reaction is the more ordinary one. Nobody can complain about being punished if they act rudely towards a princess. And we're just two strangers who were raised in an orphanage—it's peculiar that we've even been allowed to approach you. And yet, you don't chastise our rudeness, and you're acting friendly towards us. So, you're an odd one."

Teo repeated his sentiment once again, though his voice was softer than it'd been earlier.

Having someone compliment me to my face left me feeling awkward rather than embarrassed.

Stop it. Don't look at me with such wonder in your eyes! I'll end up thinking I'm a hopeless sleazebag!!!

"I'm not—" I started.

"Teo, she's playing you."

I'm not as virtuous a person as you seem to think, I was about to say, but Lutz interrupted me before I could finish.

I wasn't sure when he had come over to us, but he stood behind Teo and shot an ice-cold glare at me.

"She's just trying to win us over," said Lutz. "She'll act friendly on the surface, but in her head, she's ridiculing us as monsters. You can bet that much."

"Lutz!" Teo shouted.

"You'd be better off not forcing yourself, Princess," continued Lutz. "Be honest—you're scared of us, aren't you?"

Despite Teo's admonishment, Lutz refused to stop. He hurtled naked hostility at me. His honesty, though, actually improved my opinion of him. His anger came off as sort of cute, like a stray cat hissing.

"Hmm, I suppose that I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't scared," I answered.

Despite being the one who chose to provoke me, Lutz screwed his face up, as if in pain at my sincere answer.

He really is an honest kid. Far more pure and straightforward than I am. That's probably why he's so aggressive; he's desperate not to get hurt.

"Magic lies solely in the realm of the unknown to me," I explained. "What I don't understand makes me scared, but also makes me want to learn more. And I feel the same way about you two."

I don't understand, so I want to.

When I laid bare my inner thoughts without alteration, Lutz's eyes flickered with uncertainty for a moment.

"I don't want your pity!" He stifled his words into a caustic whisper, then showed his back to us and left, without waiting for my reply.

"Please forgive my friend's terrible discourtesy." Teo, left behind by Lutz, bowed his head to me with a meek expression on his face.

As I thought, Teo's childishly innocent actions and speech are just decorations. His true nature is far more mature than his actual age.

"Don't worry," I assured Teo, "It'd be bad if he acted like that in public, but at the moment, we're the only ones here."

"You have my sincerest thanks, Your Highness," replied Teo, still using a more respectful and formal standard of speech.

"And I'd rather that you stopped that too," I said as I directed a strained smile his way.

"Gotcha, Princess." He nodded, returning to his casual manner of speaking.

"Besides," I said plainly, "it's true. I do fear you, and I feel sorry for you."

Teo's eyes briefly widened in astonishment, and afterwards he burst into

laughter, contorting his lips into a smile.

“T-Talk about laying your cards on the table! You don’t hold back, I’ll give you that.”

“You’re both sharp,” I countered, “so trying to hide it wouldn’t have stopped you from finding out.”

“You definitely are an odd one,” Teo said, struggling to contain his laughter. “You could’ve picked any number of less blunt ways to say the same thing.”

I couldn’t sense any animosity from him.

I was just as surprised at Teo, who was acting friendly towards me as though nothing had happened. While I wouldn’t have expected him to be as blatant about it as Lutz, I’d thought that he’d put more distance between us.

Noticing my bafflement, Teo put on a smile which was slightly different to the ones he had shown me before. Much more relaxed. “I find your directness comforting. It sounds way more trustworthy than the people who speak only in platitudes.”

“Teo...”

“I’m sure Lutz feels the same way too. But he can be a pain in the ass, so he won’t come around so easily. Give him a little more time and I think he’ll drop his guard,” Teo advised.

“Like you have?” I blurted out.

He winked lightly, but brazenly.

His expression and voice were now different from what they’d been not long before. His features were composed, and his tone was gentle. I guessed that this version of Teo was closer to his true nature.

He’s lowered his guard just a little. No more than a little though. He must’ve meant what he said when he called me trustworthy. Well, that’s plenty enough for me.

The two sorcerers had been forcibly brought to the castle against their wishes. On top of that, they’d been forced to wear magic-restricting chokers, so it was only reasonable that they wouldn’t be able to trust the royal family. That

they'd despise and detest us.

When I thought of it like that, their attitude was, if anything, quite amicable for the circumstances.

"I'll lend you a hand with Lutz, so let's keep at it," Teo said.

"Thank you." I returned a half-hearted smile to Teo's joyful one.

I'm not sure how much "keeping at it" I have in me, but I'll give it my best shot. For the moment anyway, I have a plan.

"For starters, could you tell me Lutz's favorite foods?"

Let's aim for the stomach.

The Sorcerers' Chitchat

"The princess is pretty weird, isn't she?"

Back in our room, I called out to Lutz, who'd come in after me.

Lutz took off his bulky robe and flung it onto the back of the chair, then, without removing his shoes, laid himself on the bed facing the ceiling.

"Where're your manners?" I cautioned him, but he was deaf to me.

He crossed his arms beneath his head as a makeshift pillow and closed his eyes.

"Don't go to sleep," I warned him after he'd taken up a restful pose.

"Shut it." He scrunched his face and turned to the side, away from me. He was in a mood.

I thought about asking whether he was entering his rebellious phase, but I kept my silence, judging it best not to make his mood any worse.

I picked up the robe he'd strewn across the chair and gave it a light pat to rid it of dust. The material was of high quality, so the robes didn't lose their shape, but the weight of it always gave me stiff shoulders.

When it comes to uniforms, is appearance prioritized over functionality? I can see why posturing and bluffs are important, but honestly, I'd be happier wearing something I could move around in.

After placing our robes on hangers, I headed to the desk. I fetched some paper from inside the drawer and began jotting down what I'd learned that day.

When it had been decided that we'd be coming to the palace as sorcerers, I'd been worried about what sort of perilous training regimen we'd be put under. Surprisingly, our real practice was still some ways off.

At first, we'd just be listening to lectures and working to increase our stamina, since we'd been told that the body is just as important to sorcerers as it is to everyone else. I liked getting my body moving and I didn't mind the lectures either. Having the chance to learn medicine was a particularly happy

miscalculation.

Life in an orphanage had been anything but affluent, and pricey medicines never found their way to our door. We'd been allowed to see a doctor for only the severest of illnesses, so we had to cure minor ailments like colds and stomachaches with rest alone.

Each time I'd heard one of the little 'uns cry that their stomachs hurt, I'd thought to myself in vain, *If only I had knowledge of medicine.*

"Who would've guessed the princess would be learning with us? It's been one surprise after another ever since we stepped foot into this palace," I expressed, half to myself, while sketching a picture of a plant in my notes.

The plant's stalk branched off in multiple directions, its leaves parted wide, and a dense bush of white fur grew on its underside. The princess had called it mugwort.

I copied down all the information that she'd taught me, without omission: *Stops bleeding. When decocted and ingested, also works against internal disorders, chills, and stomachaches.*

If studying alongside the princess was surprising, then the depth of her knowledge was jaw-dropping.

Medicine couldn't have been a necessary skill for a girl who'd eventually marry some noble or royal from somewhere else. She had no reason to study it in earnest.

And there I was, brushing her off, thinking we'd only meet on the first day anyway. Then she stuns me by reciting facts out of nowhere. Ones that aren't even in the textbook. How did a royal princess know the proper way to eat a weed that grows on the side of the road?

There was no end to the riddles or to my curiosity.

"I didn't think we'd find anyone decent among the nobles and royalty, but I have a good feeling about that princess," I said.

"Didn't take you long to fall for her," Lutz spat out. He'd finally opened his mouth, but his voice was thick with exasperation and scorn.

Jeez, this guy.

I couldn't see his face, since he was turned away from me, but I bet that he was scowling. I placed my quill down with a sigh.

"I'm not saying that I trust her wholeheartedly, but I do think she's worthy of a little faith."

"How?" Lutz questioned.

"You couldn't tell after spending time with her?" I asked.

"Nope."

"She's kind," I insisted. "You'd find out if you spoke with her."

"Not happening."

I snapped, fed up with his immediate replies. "Do you plan on taking part in this conversation at any point?"

Don't waste my time with questions if you're not going to listen to me.

I put an arm on the back of the chair and swung my torso around to look behind me.

"This is a princess we're talking about. She's a royal. You shouldn't be surprised if one insolent look lands you in hot water, let alone saying anything to her," I continued. "Just look at how pissed off the guard was with your attitude. It's a miracle that you got off without punishment."

Lutz said nothing.

"You oughta be grateful to her," I added.

There was no counterargument from Lutz, and he instead fell silent. It seemed that he was aware of how awful his attitude had been.

"Moreover," I continued, "even if she did approach us just to get on our good sides, I doubt that she meant us any harm."

"How could you—" *How could you know that?* was the question that Lutz tried to ask.

But I cut off his query mid-sentence, and answered before he finished

speaking, “You and me, we’re sensitive to people’s malice, so we can tell, right?”

When I looked deep into his eyes, he sat upright and gulped.

Then he turned downwards and bit his lips.

From the day of our birth, our magical powers had never done us any favors. We were shunned, loathed, and feared. There was nowhere we belonged. Though the occasional sweet words came our way, they were generally varnished in lies. They say that the eyes speak louder than the mouth, and that was exactly right. However pretty the act, ill will and malice would show in the eyes.

“The princess wasn’t lying,” I asserted. “More importantly, it’s stupid to doubt someone who straight up confesses to pitying you.”

The memory made me chuckle. At that moment, I’d learned that what’s *actually* said isn’t so important, when the *way* it’s said is so impressive.

I couldn’t be certain that the princess had no schemes in mind, big or small, but I could get behind the way she tried to be sincere.

“She said that?” Lutz whispered quietly, his face looking astonished.

He was the one who’d said “I don’t want your pity” as a parting jab, but it seemed that he hadn’t expected her to admit to pitying us so easily.

“She said that it’s true—that she fears us, and that she pities us. And she said that she wants to know more about us all the same. Don’t you think that we should make a little effort on our part too?”

Lutz was wordless again. But this silence probably carried a different nuance than his previous outright rejection. He was sitting cross-legged on top of the bed in deep thought, and observing his posture, I surmised that he was wavering somewhat. I knew how deep-rooted his mistrust of others was, so a change of heart surely wouldn’t come quick.

For now, let’s call it a day.

I knew that pushing him too hard would have the opposite effect from what I wanted, so I turned back to the desk. While adding to my notes on medicinal

herbs, something popped into my mind. I addressed Lutz behind me.

“By the way, the princess said she’ll be making some refreshments for us.”

“What?” Lutz asked. “Refreshments?”

“Yeah. Candy, I think.”

“Candy...” repeated Lutz.

Lutz loved anything sweet. That single word—candy—instantly changed the doubtful tone in his voice.

“Your favorite, right?” I asked.

“Whatever.” He brushed me off after a brief pause.

Jeez, Lutz, just be honest.

“First things first,” said Lutz, “it’s misleading to say that *she’ll* prepare them. She commands, and the cooks make. That’s all she’ll be doing, isn’t it?”

“You’re splitting hairs,” I countered. “For starters, even noble girls don’t cook, so there’s no way the princess of a big kingdom could make candy herself. That much should be obvious.”

“If she wants to be friends, she’s gotta put in a little work,” Lutz said with a huff.

“Just listen to yourself...” I groaned in exasperation. He left me flabbergasted. I scratched my head and sighed.

Unfortunately for the princess, she still has a long way to go in her quest to befriend Lutz, I whispered in my thoughts with resignation.

However, two days later, Lutz and I would both be in for a shock when we learned that the candy she brought to us for refreshments was of her own making.

The Strenuous Effort of the Reincarnated Princess I was in the kitchen at night.

I stood with a cooking utensil in one hand, but I was unsure of what to do.

“What should I make today?”

This was already my fifth round of making candy. It was too soon to run out of ideas, but I had trouble every time—there were too many ingredients that I couldn’t find in this world, so I couldn’t use the best recipes that I’d learned in my previous life.

“Anything you make will surely be the most wondrous delight there could be, Lady Rosemary.”

“Klaus,” I said, deadpan.

“Yes?”

“Be quiet.”

“Understood.”

Today, as always, I had the annoyance of my personal guard at my back. I let out a sigh.

What made him turn so weird? In the game, as long as nobody flipped his masochism switch, he was a normal, good young man.

But for some reason, abnormality plagued Klaus at present. His looks, if nothing else, were first-class. This was to be expected for a suitor character, but his words and actions sabotaged all of that. If left alone, he’d start lavishing me with every sort of unbidden compliment, just as he’d done a moment ago.

To be honest, it’s a massive pain in the ass. Who wants to see a pretty boy tripping over himself to flatter a little girl at every turn?

Being around Klaus during nighttime was a huge burden, and it came with a healthy dose of mental exhaustion—at the moment though, I couldn’t protest too strongly. After all, I was getting my way.

For want of a better plan, I'd focused my attacks on Lutz's taste buds in an attempt to get closer to him. Luckily, it was proving to be an unexpectedly effective strategy.

After learning about Lutz's sweet tooth from Teo, I'd planned to ask one of the chefs to make some candy. But the sweets that the palace chefs whipped up tended to be overly extravagant. To put it bluntly, they wouldn't serve well as refreshments.

In that case, I'll make them myself, I'd thought, but obviously a princess had no opportunities to go into the kitchens.

That was where Klaus had come in; I'd made him pull a few strings, and this allowed me to creep into the kitchens at night for personal use.

Klaus had just one condition: whenever I went to cook, he required that I always take him to guard me.

"I've already made steamed buns, so..." I murmured.

The mugwort steamed buns had gone down spectacularly.

Since this world had no adzuki beans, I'd instead diced up something similar to a sweet potato and mixed in the pieces for a filling. The two sorcerers had eaten the buns with relish. They'd enjoyed the cookies and the madeleines as well, but when I realized that they might have a surprising preference for Japanese-style foods, I'd set myself the challenge of making red bean paste.

I was still having no luck obtaining adzuki beans, so I'd substituted them out for something similar to a cannellini bean.

And here we have the finished cannellini bean paste. Great! It's white bean paste, not red, but it's turned out yummy anyway, if I do say so myself. The question is, what should I make with all the paste that I prepared yesterday?

Without glutinous rice, mochi-wrapped confections like daifuku weren't an option. I'd have also needed that rice to make other starch-based sweets, like nerikiri.

With a longing for those foods in my mind, all of a sudden I desperately want glutinous rice. Next time I meet Julius, I'll try asking him to find some.

Unfortunately, bread was the staple food of the various countries in this region, including Nevel. Not a single farm cultivated rice. Perhaps someplace on the outskirts of the continent grew rice, but there was no mention of this in the public records. Even so, I'd managed to find Thai fish sauce, so I was certain—somewhere out there was a country with Asian-style cuisine.

I won't stop searching. Not until the day I can get my hands on rice, normal and glutinous. Oh, and soba noodles too.

For today though, what should I make? Something cold would fit the season, but a jelly-coated dessert like mizu manju won't be easy to make without a fridge. The palace does have an ice room, but I probably shouldn't use it without permission.

Okay, let's take the easy route: make pancakes, sandwich them together with sweet bean paste, and done! That's dorayaki.

"By the way, what came of the matter I asked you to investigate?" I asked Klaus, who was behind me. I continued lining up the ingredients, not turning around to face him.

"Here is what you requested." His hand glided into my view gently and placed a piece of paper above the worktop.

I glanced down at the folded note while whisking the eggs and sugar in my mixing bowl. Written upon it was the personal information of one of the maids.

Hilde Kremer, fifteen years old. From a household of wealthy merchants. Her family is composed of her grandfather, father, mother, an older brother, and an older sister.

Hmm, so she's a distant relative of Baron Bechem's wife.

I gave a little nod, and Klaus picked up the letter and threw it into the flames of the stove. The small scrap of paper caught fire in an instant and immediately turned to ash. After seeing the last of it burn, I resumed making the pancake patties for the dorayaki.

While sieving and mixing the flour, I thought about Hilde.

Hilde Kremer was likely the woman who would be the catalyst for Lutz's

derangement. The incident that would spark Lutz Eilenberg's mental scarring would occur a little while before he turned fourteen.

As I said before, sorcerers in this world were exceedingly rare. Lutz in particular possessed an outstanding talent, which was said to be found only once every few hundred years. There were countless people both inside and outside of Nevel who'd prowled after him.

However, in *Hidden World*, Lutz found himself the target of a group that was, by far, more wicked than all the rest.

The group's client was the War-Hungry King, who reigned over a country adjacent to one of Nevel's neighbors. The king had callously ordered the apprehension of Lutz, just as flippantly as if he were requesting the purchase of a rare weapon. In his warmongering machinations, the king forged connections within Nevel, slipped an informant inside the palace, and abducted Lutz. He then attempted to use Lutz's magical powers to support his wars.

Lutz feared that he would be turned into a living piece of artillery meant for slaughter, so he'd attempted to escape.

But he was soon caught. The king used a maid from Nevel, whom he'd abducted at the same time as Lutz, as a hostage against him.

The maid had taken a romantic interest in Lutz while he'd lived in Nevel's palace, and he'd, in turn, developed a slight romantic affection for her. Unfortunately, this made her the perfect leverage to use against him.

If he was to protect her, Lutz had no choice but to obey the king.

Lutz was indeed used as a weapon; he'd charged through battlefields and slain masses of enemies, in hopes that she would remain safe. When Lutz at last received permission to see the girl face-to-face, he learned the shocking truth: *she* had been the informant. She'd been placed inside the palace for espionage purposes, and had assisted in his abduction.

In other words, the girl had befriended him with the express intent to trick him all along.

Betrayed and scorned as a monster, Lutz transformed his first love into an unspeaking ice sculpture.

Afterwards, the king was assassinated and his kingdom lost the war. Lutz barely escaped with his life amid the turmoil, and was taken into the custody of the Kingdom of Nevel. He became the court sorcerer.

To prevent this dark future, I had personally wanted to keep Lutz and the girl from ever meeting. Unfortunately, the girl's name hadn't turned up in the paragraphs of Lutz's backstory. There'd been no illustrations of her, so I had no idea what she looked like. There was also no indication as to why she'd betrayed him.

However, while I was worrying about the next step to take, one of the maids had, at last, made contact with Lutz.

That woman was Hilde Kremer.

All the other maids kept their distance from Lutz and Teo. They were afraid of sorcery, which was a strange and unknown existence to them; only Hilde had proactively drummed up conversation with Lutz.

It has to be her.

At least I think so, but I can't say for sure. After all, Lutz clearly doesn't have any interest in her.

If everything went down as it had in *Hidden World*, she would become Lutz's first love.

But, for now, he'd ignored her when she'd spoken to him, and he'd run away with a look of undeniable annoyance when she'd approach him. I couldn't discount the possibility that he was just being shy, but I thought that his reactions were too harsh for a simple tsundere; there was no trace of warmth underlying his coldness.

One additional point of concern was that I didn't know the reason why she'd try to manipulate him. Hilde had been raised in a family of wealthy merchants, so the chances that she was after money were low. Moreover, this wasn't the sort of evil plan that a fifteen-year-old girl would come up with.

Based on this fact, I ascertained that there must've been someone pulling her strings behind closed doors. Hilde's merchant family were too upstanding to be the possible masterminds though. While she did have distant noble relatives in

Baron Bechem's family, they weren't the likely culprits either. The current Baron Bechem was famed as an opportunist who liked to sit on the fence during conflict. Therefore, I didn't think that he'd have the guts to plunge himself into such a major affair.

Anyway, Lutz's lack of interest and Hilde's absence of any clear motive were the two reasons why I couldn't be sure that she was the culprit.

"Lady Rosemary," called Klaus.

The patties had finished baking while I was carried away in thoughts, so I was lining them up on a board and covering them with a damp cloth. I looked over my shoulder at Klaus and saw him watching me with a grave expression.

"Klaus?"

What's wrong? I thought. I tilted my head slightly, pressing him to continue.

After a moment of hesitant silence, he spoke: "I can be of more service to you. All you have to do is give me the order."

I was dumbfounded. The words Sir Leonhart had spoken to me some time ago passed through my mind, and the sight of the pugilant expression on Klaus's face ensured that I understood the truth of it: *he's a savage wolf, not a tame dog.*

The blazing light in his eyes and the powerful tone of his voice urged me to make use of him.

Resolve yourself, and find the inner strength to use me, I felt that he was telling me.

I pursed my lips and kept silent.

I wasn't ready yet. Not ready enough to live up to his loyalty. My half-hearted approach to him always left him running around after me. That's all I ever did. I didn't have the right to answer "yes" or "no" to his question.

So instead I made my reply vague.

"You do more than enough. Thank you, Klaus."

His face darkened at my blandly positive expression.

I'd dodged his direct profession of loyalty with only a smile. *What a terrible person I am to work for.*

He wanted to do more, and his innocent frustration made him bite down on his lips, but he didn't seem disappointed in me. The sight pained my heart.

I'm sorry, Klaus.

Inside my mind, I gently whispered the apology that I couldn't say aloud.

The following day, I was in the break room, which was located next to the plant-filled greenhouse.

"Are you serious?" Teo asked me after a few seconds of silence. He was frozen in position with a teacup in his hand.

"I don't see what's so surprising." I gave a small nod while staring back at his pigeonite-colored, almost ocher, eyes. He'd opened them wide in shock.

"Going by that reaction, you *are* serious," Teo whispered with a sigh, wearing a strained smile and making no effort to hide his shock.

Teo was gradually coming to reveal his true personality more frequently. He was quite fond of sarcasm, and in this case, it felt like he was making fun of me pretty directly. His completely unreserved and unforgiving attitude left me conflicted—should I be happy that we'd become such good friends? Or pissed off that he was treating me rudely?

He evaded my light glare with an aloof grin.

All I did was a little probing about Lutz and the maid Hilde.

Hilde Kremer was a beautiful girl with a docile air to her. Her flaxen hair was long, and her green eyes harbored a gentle look. When she dropped her head and blushed, she made everyone desire to protect her—Hilde's faint smiles were guaranteed to seize the hearts of all the boys who preferred a pure and innocent look.

That's how cute she is, and now she's trying her hardest to strike up conversations with Lutz.

Her act might not work on me, but that was because I'd viewed her with suspicion from the start. A boy without my mistrust shouldn't find her unpleasant; that'd be rather strange. I think that it's only natural for a healthy boy to be won over, just like Lutz was in Hidden World.

So why is he putting her off so stubbornly? Doesn't he want to be around someone who understands him?

When I decided to be upfront and ask Teo about it, he gave me the incredulous reaction from before.

But...why?

"Oh, Lutz! Just in time," said Teo.

"Huh? What is it?" Lutz asked with a suspicious look on his face, since the conversation had suddenly focused on him. He'd finished his errands and arrived a little after we had. He sat down at our table in a crude movement, and the elegantly crafted cast-iron chair creaked out a dry scream.

I picked up the pot, which I'd shrouded in a tea cosy, and while pouring tea for Lutz, I listened to their conversation with a distant look in my eyes.

Are they gonna make fun of me again? I am a princess, in case they've forgotten.

Although perhaps not a very convincing princess, as I was pouring the tea myself.

But I'd had no choice—I'd sent the maids away, and Klaus's home economics skills were catastrophic.

Klaus had poured my tea just once before. He'd agreed so enthusiastically upon hearing my request that I'd been amazingly convinced that he could handle housework.

He can do anything, I'd thought, giving him a rare mental compliment.

And yet...

The *thing* he'd made couldn't be called tea. It was bitter, sour, and too sweet. On top of that, for some reason, it'd been gloppy.

Someone should've complimented me for not spitting out the one sip that I'd taken.

I'd withheld the urge to grab him by the collar, shake him, and scream, "What the hell did you put in there?!" Instead, I'd feigned composure.

When I'd asked him in a roundabout way whether he'd supplemented the tea with anything, he had replied with a confused no.

You got this muck out without putting anything else in? Okay, I'm impressed.

That day had taught me never to entrust housework to Klaus. So now, the task of pouring the tea had fallen to me, by process of elimination.

"Lately, one of the maid girls has been chatting to you a lot, right?" asked Teo.

"Oh, that."

A single glance was all that it took to know that Lutz's mood had taken a plunge.

Lutz squinted his eyes deeply, and his eyebrows knitted together tightly on his forehead. To top it off, as he spoke, the tone of his voice dropped.

If he'd acted like that towards me, my heart would be in pieces, no question.

"The princess finds it strange that you're openly shunning that girl. She thought you'd want someone who understands you. So what's the story?" asked Teo, and for some reason, his eyes looked amused.

"What?" After a beat of silence, the voice that Lutz growled out was incredibly low. His eyes were still narrowed unhappily, and he pierced me with a glower.

Yikes! What did I do to earn the full force of your glare?!

"Are you stupid?" The words that Lutz spat out with a sigh came dolloped with a generous serving of exasperation, just like Teo's had.

They'd finally made fun of me to my face, but I couldn't really argue because I didn't understand their reasoning.

This is strange. All I'm trying to do is see whether Lutz has any reason to avoid Hilde. Why are they both tag-teaming me with ridicule?

I placed Lutz's teacup in front of him, still thinking that they were being unreasonable. He thanked me, though his expression was still one of displeasure. I placed the dorayaki down next. His eyebrows unfurrowed and his attitude softened.

There's nothing better than sweet things for cheering Lutz up.

"You know, I don't have to settle for just anyone," Lutz declared. His voice was almost angry. "Do you get it?"

"Exactly," Teo added. "If he'd been starving and deprived of food, he would've chomped down on anything edible you put in front of him."

"Huh?" What are they talking about? Is Hilde the food here?

Lutz nodded at Teo, who wore a know-it-all look, and turned his eyes to me. His once-stony, glazed eyes had recently started to possess vigor. My face was reflected in his gaze, caught in an indigo blue the color of the dawn sky, like when the morning star still shines.

After gazing at my face for a while, Lutz averted his eyes and reached his hand towards the teatime snacks.

"I'm not dumb enough to take a bite of poisoned, spoiled meat when my stomach's full of the finest dishes," Lutz said. He then bit into my handmade dorayaki.

Huh? Maybe they meant that in a literal way, not a metaphorical one. Is the finest dish my dorayaki?

Maybe Hilde went after his taste buds too, and made him refreshments? I really don't see her trying to feed him poisoned, spoiled meat though. Could Lutz have discerned what's behind her kindness?

Before I had a chance to ask him about his basis for harboring distrust towards Hilde, Lutz dumbfoundedly whispered to himself, "Oh wow, what's this? It's delicious." In a rare sight, he widened his eyes and stared at the dorayaki.

I'm glad that you think it's delicious, but can we forget the snacks for a moment and talk about Hilde?

“It’s spongy and moist... Really though, what is it?” Lutz continued. “The filling is so strange. It’s not jam, and it’s not cream either. It’s so sweet, but not overpowering. It’s just too tasty!”

Thank you for your commentary, Mr. Culinary Reporter.

The thing is, Lutz, your princess is trying to have a serious discussion right now. I’m delighted that it was to your liking, but take a hint.

“Lutz, I think the princess wants to hear about the maid girl,” Teo piped up. He’d been watching our back-and-forth while resting his chin in his hands. It sounded like he’d thrown me a lifeline, but there was a clear smile present in his eyes and in his voice.

This is amusing him to no end.

“Who cares about that? This is way more important,” Lutz said.

Just as I thought that Teo’s intervention had brought the conversation back on track, it immediately returned to its original course.

Like hell it is! I instinctively retorted in my mind.

Faced with choosing his own future on the one hand and dorayaki on the other, is this guy really about to go for the dorayaki?

I cradled my forehead to endure my headache.

Teo finally broke and started to laugh out loud, no longer hiding it. Beside him, Lutz was just enjoying the dorayaki while rabbiting on about its splendor.

Well, the important thing is that they’re enjoying themselves, I guess...

“Do you like it that much?” I heaved a single sigh, then asked him in spite of my irritation. Lutz nodded at once.

Where usually he’d be broody, eyes only half-open, now his gaze was shining as he bounced his head up and down, over and over again. He reminded me of a little child.

How could I stay angry at him?

He was so delightful to watch that I let a smile slip through.

“I’ll make you some more soon, with a slightly different filling,” I promised.

“You don’t have to change the filling,” Lutz remarked. “This is tastier than jam or cream.”

He’s taken quite the profound liking to bean paste.

I suppose I’ll leave the paste as is and add some Japanese chestnuts or something. But if I’ve got white bean paste, then I just have to flavor it with something citrusy, maybe yuzu... Wait, that’s no good, I don’t have any yuzu. At this time of year, cold dorayaki is tasty too. I wonder if there’s some way I can get to use the ice room?

“Oh!” I exclaimed, clapping my hands. I looked at Lutz, who was eyeing me suspiciously, and it came to me: *I might not be able to use the ice room, but there’s a fridge right in front of me!*

“Hey, Lutz, how would you feel about using your magic to make frozen desserts?”

“...What?”

“...Huh?”

At my suggestion, Lutz and Teo both opened their eyes as wide as saucers. Their mouths hung half-open.

“Frozen desserts?”

“That’s right,” I said. “The only ingredients we’ll need are fresh cream, eggs, and sugar. Don’t worry, I won’t forget to ask Miss Altman for permission.”

Miss Altman could be rather cool, but she was a flexible person as well. Plus, she seemed to have a sense of humor—I thought if I presented my suggestion as a form of magical training, she’d give me permission.

Actually, making sweets should require a precise fine-tuning of their magic. It can’t be easy to maintain a stable temperature over time. If I think about it like that, this starts to sound like a great plan, right? Lutz gets to practice controlling his magic, and I get to eat ice cream!

We can have strawberry and banana flavors, and peach sounds good too! Tea-flavored, coffee-flavored, matcha... Maybe I’ll have to give up on that last

one for the moment. Scrumptious with or without nuts, and we could break up some chocolate and mix it in—that sounds delicious too. But you can't beat the standard: vanilla.

“You're gonna use me as a makeshift ice room?” Lutz whispered in hushed tones, while I was distracted by thoughts of ice cream. I couldn't see his facial expression because he'd hung his head, but his shoulders were trembling.

Shit, have I made him angry?

“If Lutz is the ice room, then I guess that makes me the stove.” Teo drooped his head, and covered it with his right hand. His shoulders were trembling, just like Lutz's.

Oh, now that you mention it, there's an oven right by my side too, I thought, while I kept my mouth shut with an innocent look on my face. If my inner voice had slipped out, they'd have probably yelled at me immediately for my lack of remorse.

Maybe that was an insensitive thing to say to them, after all the trouble that their magical powers have put them through. I suppose I really should apologize.

I hadn't at all intended to make fun of them—in fact, I believed that their powers were a wonderful thing.

“Lutz, Teo, I—”

“Ah ha ha!!!”

I'm sorry, I'd tried to whisper, but my voice was drowned out by their raucous laughter.

“Huh?” was all I could say.

The two of them were bent double, roaring with laughter, as I sat there, frozen and dumbfounded. The sound of their cheerful cackles and the occasional coughing fit resounded throughout the room.

“Good day to you, Ice Room!” shouted Teo.

“And to you, Stove!” responded Lutz.

They pointed at each other, using “Ice Room” and “Stove” in place of their

names, laughing all the way and exacerbating their breathing difficulties.

What's up with these guys?

"Lutz, Teo." I tried again.

"You're the best, Princess!" Teo exclaimed. "You have an extraordinarily powerful sorcerer at your disposal, and you use him for an ice room?!"

"I didn't see that coming one bit! For all your talk about how scared you were of us a few weeks ago, you don't have any sense of danger!" Lutz chimed in.

I said nothing.

I understand that I'm the one most at fault; I'd rounded up two genius sorcerers and treated them like a fridge and an oven. I can't defend the poorness of my memory, since I'd said with a straight face that I was afraid of their strange power. And yes, maybe it is pathetic that I got so enthralled while discussing frozen desserts, especially after trying to end the talk of dorayaki and encouraging conversation about the maid.

But even so, you don't have to laugh that much!

"You meanies..." I mumbled.

"S-Sorry, Princess."

If you want me to accept your apology, then stop laughing!!!

I was now in a mood, and after I went silent, they tried to bring an end to their laughter. But several times, they remembered my remarks and let out giggles, which they tried to disguise as coughs.

You still don't look apologetic, assholes!

"Hmph." I turned my head to the side. I'd lost my temper.

Go on, tell me that I'm acting like a child. I am a child! I'm a pretty little ten-year-old girl. Okay, sorry, I'm getting carried away.

"Cheer up." Shocked at the sensation of a gentle pat on my head, I looked up to see that Lutz was leaning over and staring at me with a kind smile on his lips.

My eyes widened. A smile like this was exceedingly rare for a tsundere like him.

“It’s because you are the way that you are—that’s why our stomachs are full. Get it now?” Lutz asked.

“Exactly. We’re full up, so we don’t need anyone else,” Teo informed me, with a gentle look in his eyes.

All of a sudden, I felt restless.

At the same time, I thought, *Your “stomach’s full”? You’re “full up”? What on earth does that mean?*

However, I didn’t have the time to dwell too deeply on that thought. First, I had to do something about the clear and present danger to Lutz.

“For now, Lutz, could I just get you to stop patting my head?” I said, my face serious. Lutz’s eyes widened. I wasn’t saying that because I was embarrassed, or because I didn’t want to be treated like a child, or anything like that.

“Otherwise, Klaus just might kill you.”

The Apprehension of the Reincarnated Princess Klaus had been furious with Lutz for patting my head, but fortunately, I'd managed to soothe his anger. Afterwards, I'd steered the conversation back on track, and when I'd heard all that Lutz and Teo had to say, we'd parted.

I now doubted that there was much chance of Lutz and Hilde growing closer, but that didn't mean that I'd broken Lutz's abduction flag just yet. After all, our enemies had ties with an entire hostile nation, so I couldn't see them giving up so easily. Hilde's failure would only force our opposition to devise another scheme.

I'd been feeling an urgent need to smoke out the conspirator behind Hilde's treachery. Lucky for me, I barely had to do any seeking—valuable information soon found its way into my ear, courtesy of Teo.

Lutz and Teo possessed an acute eye for people's malice, due to their innate powers and the way magic had affected their relationships during childhood. They had a knack for discerning lies and ulterior motives from facial expressions, gestures, and mannerisms. That's how they'd seen through Hilde's act.

Of course, they hadn't figured out what she'd been scheming, but they'd reported that her friendly demeanor seemed to be part of some ploy. Because of this, they'd kept their distance from her.

Hilde's proactive approaches were directed entirely at Lutz, which left Teo free to observe her actions unnoticed. Just once, Teo had witnessed Hilde sneaking about, attempting to remain unseen. When Teo followed her, he'd seen Hilde and a man skulking in the shadows for a clandestine meeting.

They'd appeared to be arguing. Hilde had been desperately trying to cling to the man, and he'd shaken her off.

A shadowy guy meeting with Hilde in secret? Looks to me like we have our mastermind. I'd like to put this guy down as my final answer—he has to be the culprit who enticed Hilde into helping abduct Lutz.

Perhaps the reason Hilde had taken part in this evil scheme hadn't been for money, or wealth, or honor, but for the affection of the man she loved, and that alone.

If that was the case, then I could form a hypothesis—the reason why Hilde had been abducted at the same time as Lutz during *Hidden World* was because this man had tricked and betrayed her. From the beginning, he'd intended to sell her out at the same time as Lutz, using her as a hostage to guarantee the sorcerer's obedience. Hilde had eventually rejected Lutz, but only after learning that the man she'd loved had deceived her and cast her aside.

What a guy.

While Hilde's cruel attempt to manipulate Lutz was beyond forgiveness, this man was the true monster. Toying with a young girl's heart for his own ends? Despicable.

At this stage, all the information I had was based on unsubstantiated conjecture, but I was nonetheless beset by rage. Delusions ballooned in my mind. My mental image of Hilde began to change from an uncaring manipulator into that of a determined young girl who'd nurtured her first crush in secret.

Rosemary von Velfalt, age ten. Hobbies: daydreaming.

Well, regardless of whether my speculations about Hilde are true or not, I'd better investigate that man first of all. The only real information I have right now is Teo's witness testimony. He said that the man wears the uniform of the royal guard, so my plan is to yank at that string until everything unravels.

I'd wanted to conduct my investigation as covertly as possible, since it was a delicate matter, but I was working at a disadvantage with such scarce information, so I didn't have many options.

Regardless, I need to do everything that I can.

"So he's slender, left-handed, and has long hair in a bright color? Hmm."

Sir Leonhart von Orsein confirmed what I'd told him of the man's features, then paused in thought.

"That's right," I stated. "Do you know him?"

"I believe so." He nodded at my question without much delay.

Pressed for time, I'd decided that the quickest route to information was through Sir Leonhart.

I could've asked Klaus, who was also enlisted in the royal guard, but he couldn't match Sir Leonhart's breadth of connections. While Klaus seemed like he could get along with anyone, in reality, his relations showed a clear bias. He was thorough about this; he paid zero attention to those who didn't interest him.

My choice to ask Sir Leonhart was guided by my conviction that he'd present me with a richer supply of information. And most certainly not any personal feelings. Probably.

Sir Leonhart seemed to immediately realize the identity of the man, though for some reason, he didn't tell me right away.

After a moment's silence, he turned his gaze towards me. I grew unsettled; when he looked at me with his clear, obsidian eyes, it felt like even my innermost thoughts were laid bare.

"I'd ask you one thing before I tell you," said Sir Leonhart. "Could you let me know why you're searching for him?"

"I, uhh..."

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't actually tell him the real reason. Without a shred of evidence, I couldn't state that I suspected this knight of a serious crime.

At the same time though, I didn't want to lie to Sir Leonhart.

What should I do?

Unable to come up with a clever excuse, I fell silent.

"Is it something that you'd rather I didn't hear?" Sir Leonhart pinned me with

his gaze, as though trying to discern the true intentions behind my suspicious behavior.

“N-No, that’s not quite...” I stammered.

Not good, I’m starting to sweat.

My thoughts were in overdrive, but I couldn’t conjure any good plans. All I could do was stand frozen in front of Sir Leonhart and endure the cruel passage of time.

“Women tend to be quite fond of him, so could it be—” Sir Leonhart started.

I’d been facing down, fidgeting, but somehow his guess at an interpretation had sent the conversation spiraling in an absurd direction.

“That’s not it!!!” I denied reflexively. My face bounced straight back up as I shouted. Sir Leonhart shot me a look of surprise.

He probably hadn’t meant what he’d said just now. He’d just been trying to make a kind of joke to mollify my obstinate attitude, or use a bit of banter to help us ease into the real conversation. But I couldn’t let his implication pass unchallenged.

“...That’s not it,” I repeated in a quieter tone.

He was the last person I wanted to hear that insinuation from. I fought back the tears before they could fall and pressed my lips together.

Sir Leonhart bowed his head with a meek expression. “My apologies. My poor joke has upset you.”

I shook my head, saying nothing, and his expression grew ever more concerned. Times like these reminded me that I was still a child, much to my displeasure. I should’ve played along earlier if I’d wanted to make the conversation go smoothly.

No matter what I did, I was still just a ten-year-old child. I’d have to wait another five or six years, at least, before I could hope for Sir Leonhart to think of me as a romantic prospect.

I should’ve just said that I’d heard the man was charming—then I could’ve matched my story to Sir Leonhart’s and learned any information he might’ve

had. I'd have profited much more that way, rather than by demonstrating my devotion to Sir Leonhart.

I knew all of this logically, but to my annoyance, all I could manage to do emotionally was shut my mouth.

God, I'm so inflexible.

As I hung my head in silence, a pair of boots stepped into my field of vision. A shadow spread across the floor, and I felt someone's presence right next to me.

"Nicholas von Buro." A hushed whisper reached my ears.

I instinctively flung my head back up. Sir Leonhart slowly stood up straight from his hunched position. Our eyes met.

"...Huh?" A confused murmur slipped through my lips.

"That's the name of the man that you're looking for," Sir Leonhart explained, smiling faintly at me as I stood in a stricken silence.

When he told me, I was more baffled than happy.

Why'd he tell me all of a sudden? He was so unwilling just a moment ago.

Seeing my distress, Sir Leonhart bowed his head once more. "I beg your forgiveness for being so disrespectful. For saying something to test you."

"Not at all," I replied after a brief pause, even as shock gripped my heart.

He was testing me.

When a princess asks for the name of a royal knight, does that carry some special connotation? Does it affect who gets assigned to be her guard?

If that's the case, then hold on for a moment—aside from the question of whether I'm comfortable with Klaus, the last thing I want is for Sir Leonhart to think that I'm a vulgar woman who gets pleasure from having hot guys wait on me hand, foot, and finger.

I struggled to think of a proper denial, but when I saw Sir Leonhart's face, I gasped. My ridiculous and carefree inner conflict evaporated in an instant.

Sir Leonhart, his head now raised, wore an extremely severe expression. His almond eyes were narrowed to slits, his brow furrowed, and he pursed his lips

tightly.

“However, Your Highness, I would caution you: do not stray any closer to that man than is strictly necessary,” he advised, enunciating each word carefully in a low, firm voice.

Exposed to his piercing gaze, my body started to tremble. I knew that he meant me no harm, but I broke out in goosebumps all the same. His eyes were so intense that I couldn’t move an inch.

I was overawed; this was the first time that I’d seen Sir Leonhart looking so serious.

“Your Highness?” Sir Leonhart inquired. He peered at my expression suspiciously as I stood frozen, eyes like wide saucers, holding my breath.

“Y-Y-Yes!” My reply came out as an awful shriek.

I instantly backed away, and tears welled in my eyes.

When Sir Leonhart saw my reaction, his eyes grew large and his eyebrows dropped in concern.

I’m really, really sorry! I didn’t mean to cause that look on your face!

Sir Leonhart wore a troubled expression and took a step away from me. I felt like kneeling down and begging for his forgiveness.

“Klaus!”

Sir Leonhart took care not to say anything that would startle me more, perhaps afraid that I’d start crying. Instead, he called out to Klaus, who was waiting a little distance away. They conversed about something, but their voices were too quiet for me to make out what they were saying.

Still though, why is he treating that Nicholas guy with such caution? Sir Leonhart wouldn’t make such a scary face over nothing. To him, me being around Nicholas must’ve carried some grave implication.

However, even if I’m right and Nicholas is in cahoots with a foreign country, I’m positive that the plot went unnoticed in the game. After all, there’s no way that he could’ve slipped past the palace’s security and abducted Lutz if he’d been under suspicion.

It feels as though there's now an underlying discrepancy that separates this current reality from the plot of Hidden World.

"Understood?" asked Sir Leonhart.

"Understood, Captain," responded Klaus.

There too. That's another difference from the game. Sir Leonhart assumed the post of royal guard captain at the beginning of this year; he was the royal guard captain in Hidden World too, but his promotion shouldn't have occurred this early in the time line.

The text in the beginning of the game said that he'd been recently awarded the title, so I would've thought that his appointment would take place later, only a little before the shrine maiden is summoned, around when I should turn fourteen or fifteen.

Somehow, I get the feeling that I was involved in causing this discrepancy.

When I'd been five, I'd asked Chris to fire all of Johan's teachers. It was Sir Leonhart who had replaced his old sword-fighting instructor.

One of the dismissed teachers had also apparently served as a knight. Despite the royal guard's meritocratic nature, this knight had made a big deal of his social class and thus bore an enmity towards Sir Leonhart. He'd been quite the piece of work, or so I'd heard.

I'd had nothing more in mind than wanting Johan to grow up to be a normal person, but my plan had also resulted in Sir Leonhart, who'd been unjustly held back, receiving praise commensurate with his abilities.

Hmm? Could this be why?

Now that Sir Leonhart was at the helm, maybe the royal guard had managed to pick up on irregularities that they'd missed in the game.

"Your Highness, whenever you go out, please ensure that you take Klaus with you," Sir Leonhart said. He'd wrapped up his conversation with Klaus and had turned to face me.

"Sir Leonhart..." I said, trailing off.

I've really made him worry about me, haven't I?

Seeing the concern in his expression, and hearing it in his voice, I felt ashamed.

I have to admit that I've not been the easiest to handle; I've rummaged around, stuck my nose into other people's business, and then I had the audacity to shut up the moment it suited me, just because someone pointed out my behavior.

"Okay." I nodded. Sir Leonhart breathed a sigh of relief.

There were still a few things that I'd wanted to look into, but having no way to protect myself, I knew that I'd only be stumbling around and getting in the way of Sir Leonhart and the royal guard.

I'll just have to leave the rest to them.

I'm sure that the knights will protect Lutz and Teo, I thought, and yet I couldn't shake off my anxiety.

I did trust the knights, but I couldn't help but think—my knowledge of the abduction plan from *Hidden World* gave me the intel to act in a way that nobody else could.

I couldn't escape the worry that, after everything was over, I'd be left with regret for not doing enough.

I shook my head slightly from side to side in order to chase away the negative thoughts.

"Thank you for taking the time to see me."

I said my farewells, preparing to leave, and forced myself to feel more optimistic. When I did, Sir Leonhart stopped me for some reason.

"One moment, Your Highness."

"Yes?" I asked.

He crouched down to whisper into my ear, "If there's anything worrying you, please come to me before taking action. I'll do whatever I can to assist you." As he spoke, I thought that the look on his face couldn't have been more serious.

I didn't know the correct reply to give, so all I could do was act dumbfounded.

“Princess.”

Somebody grabbed my hand and snapped me out of my daydream.

“Huh?” I looked up to find Teo standing by my side, looking down at me with concern.

“I think you’ve watered that one a bit too much,” he remarked.

“Oops!” After he’d pointed it out, I remembered where I was.

That’s right, I was watering the medicinal herbs in the greenhouse.

The round leaves of the potted herb glistened with drops of water; the soil was more than damp enough. Watering the herb any more might cause its roots to rot.

Good thing Teo was here to grab my hand and stop me.

“Thank you, Teo.”

“You’re welcome,” he smiled, letting go of my hand, but his overall expression didn’t look cheerful. I saw myself reflected in his questioning eyes.

“Princess, do you have something on your mind?” Teo asked after hesitating a little. He’d turned his head downward in thought, as though he were picking his words carefully.

While Teo had the appearance and mannerisms of someone who didn’t sweat the small things, in truth he was a very considerate person. He’d noticed that something was worrying me, but was unsure whether it would be acceptable to probe.

“He’s right, you’re acting weird,” Lutz said. Beyond my notice, he’d walked behind me all of a sudden, and was staring.

“Lutz,” I said by way of greeting.

“You’ve been down in the dumps all day,” Lutz continued. “We try to talk to you, but your head’s in the clouds, and you only give half-hearted answers. You’re not your normal self at all.”

In stark contrast to Teo, Lutz didn’t beat about the bush.

They didn't just look completely different—their personalities were also opposites in a number of ways. However, they were united in their shared feelings of concern for me.

"I'm sorry, both of you," I said.

"Don't apologize! That's not what I want. I—uhh..." Lutz sputtered.

Guilt had compelled me to apologize, but Lutz had stopped me at once. He shook his head in frustration, irritated that he couldn't find the right words to express himself.

"Lutz and I are just concerned because you don't look happy," Teo piped up, helping out Lutz, who was struggling to tone down his harshness, despite not actually being angry.

"Right?" Teo looked to Lutz for his agreement, and Lutz nodded several times in answer.

These guys make a great team.

"If you're worried about something, then tell us," said Lutz. "There's not much we can do, but we might be of *some* help, at least."

"Thank you," I said sincerely, and I really meant it.

What great kids, really.

I felt a warm sensation spread through my chest. I was so grateful to have these two boys looking out for me. For my whole life, my status as a princess had prevented me from having many friends my own age.

Even so, I couldn't actually tell them what was worrying me. I had no idea who was watching and who was listening, so I couldn't say very much in front of Lutz, their target. It would simply be too dangerous. That risk was more pressing than any concerns I might've had about explaining my uncanny knowledge of the future.

"I'm fine though," I said, reassuring. "It was a little too humid last night, so I didn't sleep very well, that's all."

This was half-true. I couldn't switch my brain off last night. I'd lain there thinking too much about all sorts of things, so I didn't get much sleep.

I think that's the reason why my head feels a little fuzzy.

"Then you shouldn't be in a hot place like this!" Lutz exclaimed. "Come on, rest up for a while over there."

"Huh?"

Lutz removed me from the greenhouse with a few forceful shoves to my back. He escorted me to the adjoining break room, where the ventilation was better.

"L-Lutz?" I stuttered, confused.

"Just stay put here," he asserted. "You're banned from the greenhouse for the rest of the day, got it?"

"But—"

"We'll water the plants," said Teo. "You just take it easy, Princess."

The two of them spoke to me as though they were calming down a small child, then returned to the greenhouse, leaving me alone except for Klaus beside me. I stood there in mute amazement.

"I think that you should accept their considerate suggestion and rest for a little while." In a rare sight, even Klaus remonstrated me.

Lately, it feels like everyone's getting angry at me for the same thing. Maybe I've been running myself ragged and just haven't realized it.

"I will."

"Very well," Klaus said. His expression softened when I sat down and relaxed. "I'll fetch you a drink."

Just a minute later, he returned. As I sipped the tea he'd brought, I looked over to the greenhouse. Beyond the glass, I could see the two boys diligently watering the herbs. Teo handled his task with adroitness, whereas Lutz compensated for his lack of skill with carefulness.

The more I came to know the two boys, bit by bit, the more I resolved that I must never let anyone turn such good children into weapons of war.

While I was taking a break, I decided to organize the information that I'd collected so far.

We have Nicholas von Buro, who might be a traitor.

I had only caught glimpses of him from afar, due to Sir Leonhart's warning to stay away, but I'd seen that Nicholas was a slender man with a sword hanging from his belt. He had light chestnut-colored hair, which would've fallen halfway down his back had he not tied it up just below his neckline.

He checks every box from Teo's testimony.

There didn't seem to be many complaints about his service as a knight either; he took his work seriously, and while his looks were unremarkable, I could see why his calm demeanor made him popular with women.

However, the real Nicholas might be an entirely different beast than his outward manner would suggest. His underlying nature could vary significantly from the facade that he presents to the world.

He belonged to the ancient and venerable family of Count Buro, whose financial circumstances were allegedly in a state of complete disrepair. I'd heard a rumor that the Buro family had only narrowly escaped ruin—the Count and Countess Buro from a few generations ago had nearly run the family fortune dry with their exceptionally extravagant lifestyles.

While the family had managed to retain their comital title, they were in debt to half the kingdom.

Sounds like Nicholas's motive is simple: money.

However, even if he succeeds in pulling off the abduction and lands himself a fortune, he'll be in too much danger to stay inside Nevel. All the money in the world is worth nothing when you're in some dungeon because your plan has failed.

Could the other country have promised him a title as well? It wouldn't be worth his while to gamble all of his chips without a payout at least that big.

The stakes are his own life and the fate of his family, so he can't afford to tolerate even the slightest chance of failure.

When my thoughts reached that point, something struck me.

Not only that, but if failure isn't an option, then it's too late for him to turn

back now. If that's how dire his situation is, then what will happen to Hilde now that she's outlived her usefulness?

Conflict for the Reincarnated Princess I bolted upright in a frenzy. The chair made a clattering noise.

“Lady Rosemary?!” Klaus asked, startled.

How could I be so stupid?

I hadn't even considered the possibility that Hilde could be at risk of harm. She knows their plan! If they've decided that they don't need her anymore, then there's no way they'd just let her be!

“Where are you going?”

I hurriedly dodged past Klaus, and he chased after me.

“Hey, what's wrong?!” Lutz shouted.

“Princess?” Teo called.

The two of them had overheard the commotion and poked their heads out of the greenhouse. Their expressions were darkened, and they had judged from my panicked state that the situation was tense.

“What happened?” Lutz asked. “We can't know unless you tell us.” He rushed over to me and shook me by the shoulders. What he'd said made me bite down on my lips.

That's exactly it. Nobody will understand unless I say something. But I mustn't tell Lutz and Teo. I'd only be putting them in more danger.

I wanted to divulge everything, but there wasn't a single person I could confide in. This situation tormented me.

“I've remembered that there's something urgent I need to do,” I said as an excuse.

“Huh?” questioned Lutz.

“I'm sorry,” I said apologetically. “Farewell for today.”

Lutz seemed like he had more to say, but I shook his hand off my shoulder and smiled at the both of them. Teo was watching me with concern from behind Lutz.

I swallowed my urge to run, and walked away as slowly as I could. Though I could feel them peering at me from behind, I didn't turn around.

"Lady Rosemary, where exactly are you going?" Klaus asked after we'd progressed through the hallway in silence and rounded the second corner.

He'd waited to ask until we were far away from the greenhouse, probably guessing from the way I'd dodged Lutz's question that I didn't want the two sorcerers to hear my answer.

"I want to find Hilde," I answered quietly.

Klaus circled around in front of me. He stood in my way, blocking my path forward, looking more serious than I'd ever seen him.

"I must protest."

Klaus was usually soft on me. He would joyfully grant most of the requests I made, and rarely had he ever refused me or objected. It was rare for him to present direct opposition to me, like he was now, unless there was a threat to my safety.

"Klaus."

"I mustn't allow you to be exposed to danger," he insisted.

My shoulders started trembling when I heard Klaus's statement.

Klaus just said that going to Hilde is dangerous.

"...So you know then," I stated.

Klaus didn't reply.

In other words, he knows that Hilde is in a perilous position. Naturally, if Klaus knows, then so does the royal guard. But then, why?

"You're not taking her into your protection?" I asked.

"She's not ours to protect," Klaus said, and his eyes were awfully cold. "I'm sure you understand."

Makes sense. Of course there's no way they'd take custody of her. However likely it is that she might wind up dead, Hilde is on the enemy's side.

In the eyes of my country, she was a traitor.

The royal guard couldn't risk letting the enemy discover their movements. They'd much rather abandon Hilde to her fate than let that happen. She would be written off as a piece of internal discord in the enemy camp.

My heart began to thump and throb, making an eerie noise. Blood coursed through my body as though I'd been running. I breathed in and out over and over, restlessly, but I still felt like I was suffocating. Cold beads of sweat dripped down the back of my neck and my spine. I was about to faint with my eyes still open.

Right now, I could affect whether someone lives or dies.

The reality of the situation struck terror into my heart. It didn't matter that I wasn't doing the deed myself, or that she might be involved in an evil crime. None of that lightened the weight that was crushing me.

At this very moment, I'm being forced to make the decision to potentially let a fifteen-year-old girl die.

I can't bear this.

A hoarse grunt escaped my mouth. I realized that I'd unconsciously wrapped my arms around myself, and my entire body was quivering in small tremors.

I'm scared. So, so, so scared.

Fear pushed all other thoughts from my mind. My head went blank, and I couldn't figure out what I ought to do as a princess. Or as a person.

"Let's go back, Lady Rosemary." Klaus broke his brief silence. He looked at me as I trembled in terror, and softened his expression to a gentle one. He pointed back the way we'd come, urging me to return.

The soothing tone of his voice, like one used to calm a child, robbed me of my capability to think. It felt like he'd gently shielded my eyes and ears and told me, *It's scary, but just don't look, just don't listen.*

"It's the boys you care about, not her. Am I wrong?"

“Klaus.” I pivoted, guided by his voice.

I took one step towards the greenhouse, then another unsteady step, and another, as though I were a puppet on strings.

Klaus was right. The ones I wanted to protect were those two kind boys, my precious friends, Lutz and Teo. A girl whom I’d never even spoken to couldn’t possibly compare.

That’s it, however I try to dress it up. I can’t pretend that I wouldn’t make the choice if I had to.

I knew that I would choose them over her, and I despised myself for it.

I stopped walking and hung my head.

“Lady Rosemary?” Klaus called out to me.

I stood still, unable to respond. Sobs threatened to rise up my throat. I wanted to scream, to let the pain out.

Moving forward. Turning back. Both options frightened me.

I don’t like either. I don’t want to go to either place.

I want to save both of them. I’m greedy, and selfish, and egotistical, and so I want to save them all.

Everyone.

I don’t want to just say “It can’t be helped.” I don’t want that phrase to become someone’s epitaph.

That’s not the sort of person I want to be!

But realistically, what can I do?

Acting alone, what little power I had couldn’t achieve very much. Though I was a princess, that title didn’t come with any real authority. I couldn’t compel anybody to act.

What should I do? What should I— Just as I felt cornered, a deep voice replayed in my mind: *If there’s anything worrying you, please come to me before taking action. I’ll do whatever I can to assist you.*

“Sir Leonhart...” I murmured.

“Is something the matter?” Klaus looked at me, confused. It seemed that my quiet words hadn’t reached his ears.

I spun around.

“Lady Rosemary?!” Klaus raised his voice as I turned my back to the greenhouse and started to walk away. Once again, he blocked my way forward.

“Klaus, move out of my way.” I shot him a glare.

“Even if it’s your order, that’s something that I cannot do.”

“I’m not going to Hilde,” I clarified.

“Then where?”

While suppressing my growing irritation and impatience, I opened my mouth to answer, but at the last moment, my attention was ensnared by a figure that I spotted behind Klaus.

I stared up and down at the girl’s petite frame, and my face betrayed my utter disbelief.

She was beautiful.

Her flaxen hair was long and straight, and her eyes were green. Even with the distance between us, I could still tell that she’d gone pale. She’d crossed her arms below her belly and was biting down on her lips.

I could sense a grim resolve from her, the sort that makes you worry about whether she was thinking of ending her own life.

To my unconcealable shock, the figure standing in the center of this drama had shown up out of nowhere—Hilde Kremer.

The Reincarnated Princess in Crisis Why is Hilde here?

This area wasn't the sort of place you could just waltz into. It housed the research facilities and lodgings of Miss Altman and the other sorcerers, along with all of the confidential information that entailed—naturally, entry was restricted.

Other than the sorcerers, like Lutz and Teo, the only ones who could enter this area at will were members of the royal family, and knights on patrol or acting as guards. Maids who weren't serving directly under a member of the royal family *could* enter, but only when cleaning, and they followed a strict duty schedule determining who did what, when, and where.

This isn't cleaning time, and I don't think that Hilde has been assigned to clean either. Did she come here for some nefarious purpose?

The thought made the wretched look on her face appear immensely more disturbing. A cold bead of sweat ran down my spine. I held my breath and searched for her motive.

Neither of us moved or said a word. We just faced each other.

Hilde was the first to break the long silence that had engulfed us. She moved one pace forward, and her footstep echoed throughout the hallway.

"Stop," Klaus said immediately. He stood in front, shielding me, and fixed his eyes on Hilde with a sharp glare. "Move any further, and you'll be entering a restricted area. Leave now," he ordered.

His voice was so cold and firm that I couldn't imagine it had come from him.

Though Klaus had only sharply reprimanded her, Hilde flinched as though he'd struck her with a whip. She stopped walking and turned her deathly pale face towards me, expression imploring.

"Your...Highness..." Hilde managed to wring out. Her voice trembled as much as her hands, which she'd clasped together.

I'd help you out, but we've only just met, so I'm not sure what I can do for you.

As I struggled to hide my discomposure, Klaus took one step forward, obstructing my line of sight. "Leave, I said. Can't you hear?" Klaus placed his fingers on the hilt of the sword strapped to his waist. The quiet metallic sound of the blade sliding a few inches out of its sheath sounded almost deafening to me.

I'd wanted to speak with Hilde, but now wasn't the time. I couldn't be sure that she wasn't up to something. And most of all, if she got any closer, Klaus was liable to cut her down.

"I didn't know!" Hilde shrieked. I'd been about to order her to withdraw, but her outburst came a single beat faster.

"That...come to this—I wasn't...wasn't—I didn't know..." she muttered incoherently, in a state of confusion.

"What are you saying?" Klaus asked with an icy tone of voice. He furrowed his brow suspiciously while watching Hilde's delirious state, but I felt like I understood what she meant.

She's saying that she didn't know it would come to this.

I was stunned.

Had Nicholas not told her anything about his plan when he drew her into this grand-scale criminal conspiracy? Was she really just a pawn in his plan, a sacrifice to be used and discarded?

I chastised myself for almost succumbing to sympathetic feelings.

I can't rule out the possibility that she's lying. How do I know she's not trying to deceive me in order to get out of the bind she's in?

But however much I tried to tell myself that, doubt remained in my heart.

"I...didn't..." Hilde staggered another step forward, and her gait was tremendously unsteady.

Her face was pale white, and there was no light in her eyes. She paid no mind to her disheveled hair, which she'd previously always kept neat and tidy. I couldn't imagine this ghostly state being a deceptive work of theatrics.

If it turns out that this response is just a performance to have her punishment abated, then she might be Nevel's greatest villain.

"Lady Rosemary, stand back." Klaus at last unsheathed his sword and brandished it towards Hilde. She continued to edge closer, step by step. The dull glint of the double-edged sword reached my eyes and brought me back to my senses.

Save the daydreaming for later!

"Klaus, don't be too rough," I urged.

"I know." Klaus answered my panicked plea for restraint in an extremely composed tone of voice. The sight of him pointing the tip of his blade towards Hilde didn't fill me with confidence, but I had to trust him.

I retreated a few paces.

Hilde advanced just as many though, as if drawn to me, and her slender, white hand reached out towards me. Her lips mouthed one voiceless word: *wait*.

I gasped at the ghastly look on her face, but at that very moment, an angry shout resounded through the hallway.

"Don't you lay your hands on her!"

All of a sudden, a man dressed in the apparel of the royal guard appeared at the end of the hallway, and charged ferociously towards us. While sprinting, he drew the sword he'd hung on his right hip and brought it swinging down, straight towards Hilde.

"Move!!!" I screamed right away.

"Huh?!" Hilde had remained upright, as the change in the situation had been so sudden, but she recoiled immediately in reaction to my cry.

She wasn't quick enough.

The sword sliced into Hilde's right shoulder, and she screamed in agony.

The impact hurled her body into the wall. The hard collision forced a murmured groan from Hilde, and she crumpled up slowly and limply onto the

floor.

Blood gushed from the gash in her shoulder, gradually staining her clothes red.

All I could manage to do was stand there in silence. I was too shocked to even scream. My brain couldn't register the spectacle unfolding before my eyes. It was like I was having a nightmare. And yet, the spatters of red on the floor and the walls, that unique smell of rusted iron grazing my nostrils, all of it screamed that this wasn't a dream.

The man who'd attacked Hilde shook the blood from his sword with a swing and turned to face me.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?" he asked, with a voice altogether too composed for someone who had just cut down a teenage girl.

He was a tall and lean young man, with soft chestnut-colored hair, and eyes of that same color.

Nicholas von Buro.

From afar, the impression he'd conjured was that of a gentle person, but seen from up close, there was a cruel tinge to his lifeless eyes.

"My apologies," Nicholas said. "I let her out of my sight, putting you in danger." His expression looked docile enough, but even that seemed like a mask put on for show.

It made me feel sick. Literally, I felt like throwing up.

"What... Just what do you think you're doing?!" I suppressed my urge to yell, and the voice I wrung out was hoarse and trembling; it sounded nothing like my own. I glared at Nicholas, while simultaneously wanting to chastise myself for how pathetic I must have looked.

Then, Nicholas approached Hilde and brought his sword down as carelessly as one would swat a bug. The hem of her deep-blue maid uniform ripped, and something tumbled out. The object bounced and rolled across the floor with a hard jangling noise.

It was a knife, with a blade about fifteen centimeters long.

Nicholas picked up this knife, which Hilde had apparently fastened to her garter belt, and made a point of showing it to me.

“As you can see, this woman is a rebel. A source of information tipped me off, but she didn’t present any opportunities to catch her, so my investigation stalled in the evidence-gathering stage.”

What’s this guy babbling about?

I was astounded at the ease with which Nicholas rattled off this untruth. Lying seemed as natural to him as breathing. There wasn’t an ounce of agitation present in his facial expression, despite the fact that he’d used, betrayed, and wanted to very soon dispose of someone who likely loved him.

There was no guilt, and no anger or sadness either. Not even pity. His inhuman eyes housed all the emotion of someone placing a piece of unneeded clutter into the rubbish bin.

His gaze chilled me to my core.

I’d lived my previous life in an era of peace, and then after my rebirth, my life had been one of shelter and constant protection, even more so than before. To me, Nicholas was my first encounter with an unquestionable embodiment of evil.

Hilde had lost consciousness, but now, propped against the wall, she stirred and let out a little groan.

Nicholas reacted faster than I could. He strode towards her and once again brandished his bloodstained sword.

“Stop!!!” I exclaimed.

“Lady Rosemary.” Klaus grabbed me and held me back from following my instincts and running to Hilde.

Klaus had appeared to be watching the situation unfold in silence, but his reaction to my movement was immediate. He’d probably devoted the entirety of his concentration to my protection, leaving no blind spots. No amount of struggling could’ve afforded me a way past him.

I gritted my teeth for being caught in his arms so easily.

“Your Highness,” Nicholas said, “this woman will continue her attempts to harm you as long as she’s alive. She needs to be dealt with right away.”

“What gives you the right?! I have *commanded* you to stop!” I yelled, even as Klaus held me back.

Nicholas, however, showed no signs of hesitation. He gave an exaggerated shake of his head, like a third-rate stage actor. “I’ll submit myself to you for criticism later, but I cannot let this woman go.”

I couldn’t say anything.

It’s no good! He’s dead set on ignoring my pleas to stop. He’s going to kill Hilde here, no matter what I do.

My heart was beating so fast that my chest hurt. Blood raced throughout my body. My ears were ringing, and my head ached.

I can’t bear this! It hurts! How do I normally breathe?

I wasn’t sucking in oxygen properly, even though I was gulping for air like a beached fish. While I watched on, dazed and pale, Hilde lifted up her head.

Our gazes met.

Her tear-stricken green eyes looked up at me, and her quivering lips slowly spelled out two words.

Help me.

“Sto—”

I reached out futilely, but nonetheless, out of the reach of my fingertips, the sword fell. No tears or screams could propel my hand to make it in time. The sharp, scarlet-stained point of his blade seared itself into my retinas in a seemingly slow-motion movement.

“Stooooop!!!”

At that moment, there was a dull clash of two objects colliding. Nicholas’s sword was wrenched from his hands. It traced a circular arc, then landed on the floor. A short sword still sheathed in its scabbard lay on the floor next to Nicholas, who was whimpering while clutching at his left hand.

“...Oh.”

A man at the end of the hall straightened his posture from a throwing stance.

“You’re in Her Highness’s presence. Stand down, Nicholas,” his deep voice ordered.

His expression was stern and his obsidian eyes emitted a sharp glint. The sight of him there, seething with anger, caused Nicholas to gasp. I, on the other hand, felt the tension drain from my body.

I would never—could never—feel afraid of him. He alone heard my cries when nobody else did.

Sir Leonhart was the only one who’d answered my prayers.

A clamor of footsteps rang throughout the hallway. Knights of the royal guard poured in, arriving just a few dozen seconds after Sir Leonhart. They surrounded Nicholas and Hilde.

“Bring a doctor! Treating her wound is our first priority!” Sir Leonhart’s firm voice barked out orders.

A female knight worked to staunch Hilde’s bleeding, and performed a swift check for concealed weapons. Though Hilde’s face was pale, her condition didn’t appear to be critical.

Nicholas’s longsword and all of his other weapons were taken away. He presented no resistance. He raised his hands, and his expression didn’t betray any hints that he felt cornered.

I found that odd and stared at him. Then he turned to face me. His eyes met mine.

“Your Highness...forgive me,” said Nicholas.

What does he have to say for himself this late in the game?

He leaned his body towards me while I watched him cautiously. A nearby knight halted him speedily though, so he didn’t manage to get any closer.

“My earnest desire to protect you caused me to act hastily,” he explained.

For a moment, understanding of what he’d said escaped me. Nicholas seemed

undisturbed that I'd frozen in place, with my mind unable to keep up, and he continued on with his argument.

"This is my fault. When I realized that she was after you, I panicked, and drove her into a corner. My inexperience allowed Your Highness to be exposed to danger. I don't know how to beg for your forgiveness."

His impassioned voice relayed a fervent appeal. Even his facial expression was pleading to me. The perplexed eyes of the knights surrounding him flitted between the two of us.

"She bears a grudge against me. I expect that she'll attempt to slander me with her testimony. But you must believe me when I say that under no circumstances would I ever betray you," Nicholas implored.

Ah, so that's how he's playing it.

He wants me to believe that he was so enamored with me that he lost control of himself. That his actions were based on loyalty; that his morals forbade him from letting a rebel live. That Hilde would resent him for cornering her, and she would try to besmirch his innocence with false claims that he was in league with the traitors.

I was shocked into an inflamed silence.

This guy thinks that his lousy, half-baked script can get him out of trouble.

Like fuck it will!!!

A rage potent enough to make me dizzy sprang up from the bottom of my stomach.

After trying to hurt my precious friends, does he really plan to ingratiate himself with me and use me in his schemes?! He's fine with involving the girl who loves him in his crimes, and then abandoning her when he's done with her, but oh! He doesn't plan on putting himself out!

What a piece of shit!!!

"Do—"

Do you really think that excuse is going to hold any water? I almost screamed, but I forced myself to pause partway through. My gaze had met Sir Leonhart's,

who stood behind Nicholas. The moment we made eye contact, I couldn't help but swallow my words. His fierce look went right through me.

Hold it in. Had I imagined seeing his lips mouthing that silently?

No, I hadn't.

I averted my eyes and exhaled.

Calm down. Compose yourself. I repeated this mantra in my head.

Why did Hilde run into me in the first place?

My assassination couldn't have been their plan, which is what Nicholas is arguing. That would've been way too haphazard, and more importantly, Hilde had no motive. In that case, is it so unreasonable to presume that she was following Nicholas's orders?

Nicholas wouldn't benefit from having me killed either. That would mean that the lousy play he performed for us a moment ago was his objective.

Or maybe this is an attempt to endear himself to me, as I could work as a hostage against Lutz.

If that's so, then Nicholas must have been watching us from somewhere. And Sir Leonhart, who showed up right in the nick of time, must have also been watching. But watching Nicholas, not us.

Which means they're giving Nicholas rope to hang himself with. Enough rope to hoist up the big players lurking further in the depths.

Enough to draw the Kingdom of Skelluts, where the War-Hungry King rules, out into the open.

I wasn't sure whether the royal guard was acting on my father's orders or on Chris's. I wasn't even sure whether my prediction was correct. I didn't know anything. My understanding was clouded, but one thing was clear: getting emotional and throwing a tantrum right here, right now, wouldn't improve the situation at all.

"I see," I said in a soft tone, squashing the fury inside. I put my rigid facial muscles to work, forcing them to form a smile.

Smile. It has to be natural; it mustn't look ridiculous. If I'm only good for holding people back, then the least I can do is put on my most stylish smirk.

"So, you saved my life then," I lied.

"Your Highness!" Nicholas looked visibly relieved.

Is my acting good enough? Have I correctly executed the face a girl would make when thanking the knight who'd saved her?

My nails dug into my hands where I'd clasped them together.

"Nicholas." I called out his name and suppressed my swelling feelings of anger and nausea. I took meticulous care not to let my spite seep into my voice.

"Thank you." I don't think I've ever said something so irreconcilable with my real feelings.

Even as I thanked him, my inner voice spat out—*rot in hell, you piece of work.*

"You honor me," Nicholas said aloofly.

I restrained my urge to sink my fist into his face, then turned my back to leave. I needed to get away from him, and quickly. I almost sprinted away, but I held my composure and slowly progressed through the hallway.

"Your Highness."

I'd turned the corner and the commotion had dwindled to silence with the distance. A voice from behind suddenly stopped me. My legs halted instinctively, and I took a deep breath.

In my present state of mind, all I wanted to do was run away, but there was no way that I could've ignored Sir Leonhart.

I thought that Klaus was with me? When did he swap with Sir Leonhart?

I'd been too preoccupied with my own thoughts to even notice the changeover.

"Yes?" I asked, with all the composure I could muster. Or I wished that there was some, anyway.

I hope he ignored the slight hoarseness in my voice, and I hope that he doesn't mind if I don't turn around to face him. It's not that I won't—rather, I can't.

Feigning vocal composure took all that I had; I couldn't manage the same for my facial expressions. My eyebrows were still furrowed and I couldn't fix that. If my concentration wavered even slightly, I wasn't sure which liquid would leak out first.

I didn't want him to see my face in this pathetic state.

The dull noise of his footsteps drew closer.

Stay back. Please, just stay there.

Perhaps my prayer reached him, because he stopped walking at a distance just close enough to hold a hushed conversation. There was a moment's silence while he appeared to hesitate, and then he let out an audible breath.

"Your Highness." He called my name again. "Forgive me."

"Huh?"

I froze for a second. His words had caught me off guard, and I couldn't understand what they meant.

Why's Sir Leonhart apologizing? I should be the one saying sorry.

"Please, leave the rest to us," he finished, leaving me to my confusion.

I swung around without thinking, forgetting the sorry state of my face, but he had already turned on his heel and was walking away.

Remorse Strikes the Reincarnated Princess I was in my bedroom, three days after Nicholas had attacked Hilde.

I'd been told that Hilde's wound wasn't too deep, so she was already on her feet. The royal guard was apparently about to start their inquiries with her, with a doctor present.

Nicholas had been confined to his quarters under supervision, but it appeared that proof of his collusion with foreign powers still remained elusive. Hilde's testimony wasn't sufficient on its own—she couldn't prove that his attempt on her life was for the purpose of concealing the evidence of his treachery. If Nicholas brushed off her story as fiction designed to frame him, there would only be a case of *he said, she said*.

Besides that, and most importantly, the chances were high that Nicholas hadn't informed Hilde of any important parts of the Lutz abduction plan.

It would be difficult to put Nicholas to trial without any evidence, though not because of an “innocent until proven guilty” tenet. Rather, he was the son of a count, and held all the social power of that title.

Even so, botching Hilde's murder had probably disquieted Nicholas. He'd have trouble making any further moves while under surveillance and suspicion, and the Kingdom of Skelluts was liable to abandon him.

That situation wouldn't suit the royal guard either; I doubted that they'd conducted the investigation for this long, just to let some small fry like Nicholas take all the blame.

If I hadn't interfered, would this whole affair have concluded more smoothly? I asked this of myself, but my introspection yielded no answers. *I wanna prove useful and make up for the mess I've made, but what on earth can I even do?*

The thought left me depressed, so I heaved a sigh from inside my bed.

Another day had ended without me leaving my room. Though night had come, I'd hardly moved all day, so I didn't feel the least bit sleepy. I read a book

to pass the time, but I couldn't really get my mind into the story.

Just as I was about to go to sleep, a little after midnight, there was a knock at the door to my room. Nobody with any common sense would visit an unmarried girl—and a princess at that—this late.

I wondered who it was, and put myself on guard, until my ears registered the voice of someone from whom I hadn't expected to hear.

"Rose, it's me. Can I come in?"

"Chris?"

I hastily donned a thin shawl and slipped out of bed. When I opened the door, Chris was standing there sporting his usual deadpan expression. I surmised that he'd only just finished working, because he was still dressed impeccably—he wore a deep-blue justaucorps made of velvet with a light-gray gilet, and a cravat was tied around his neck.

"Come in," I said.

I was a ten-year-old girl and his sister, but that didn't make visiting a woman's bedroom at night any more proper. This act seemed out of character for my upstanding older brother, but in the end, I let him inside all the same.

Well, it is Chris.

"Should I have some tea poured for you?" I asked.

Chris's expression was difficult to read. His complexion looked poor though, and I could sense his fatigue. I'd have preferred for him to return to his room for some rest, but if there was something pressing that he needed to tell me, then I'd at least want him to have a sip of tea first. That's why I offered, but Chris only declined with a slight wave of his hand.

"I'm fine," Chris said. He sloppily removed his cravat and loosened his collar. He slumped onto the sofa, breathed out a long sigh, and then turned his gaze to me.

"Come here." He narrowed his eyes gently and motioned me over.

I began to step over hesitantly. He softly took my hand and planted me beside himself. I had no reason to resist, so I submitted and sat right next to him.

What's this all about?

I tilted my head, puzzled, and looked up to him where he was sitting by my side. His face was much closer to mine than I'd anticipated. I immediately lurched backwards in surprise, but he still held my hand, so I didn't manage to put much distance between us.

I couldn't remember ever being this close to him, let alone sharing this level of physical contact. I could see every detail in his irises, and make out the texture of his almost-transparent skin. I realized that, from a certain angle, his ice-blue eyes could appear gray.

Chris didn't seem disturbed by my in-depth examination of his face. He soon flung his arms around my shoulders. At some point, while I was entranced by Chris's handsome features, my body had been laid prone on top of the sofa. My head was positioned to rest on Chris's lap.

If I didn't know better, I'd say this was one of those "lap pillows" I've been hearing about.

"Ch-Chris?" I asked, floundering.

"Yes?" he returned, his voice gentle.

Am I the weird one for getting flustered?

"Let's have a little talk." Chris addressed me, acting as though everything were completely normal, in stark contrast to my attitude and my blushing cheeks. While I was discomposed, his attitude seemed so business-as-usual that I couldn't help but feel sorry for myself.

"Sure, I don't mind," I responded. "But why do we have to talk in this position?"

Maybe it's actually normal for siblings to give each other lap pillows? I suppose I can't say I've never given Johan one.

A passing observer might find the image delightful—a doting brother giving his young sister a lap pillow. But that would really only work from the viewpoint of a third party. Now that this was happening to me, things felt different.

"It's late," remarked Chris, "so if you get tired, feel free to go to sleep right

here.”

“Well...” I murmured.

You’re asking the impossible, Chris, I retorted in my mind.

For one thing, having such a pretty face so close to me set my nerves on edge. But more than that, his legs were hard and uncomfortable. He might’ve looked skinny, but his body was composed of lots of muscle and very little fat, probably thanks to his training. To be honest, he didn’t make a very good pillow.



When I looked up, ready to say something, he narrowed his eyes slightly and a grin broke across his face.

“You should let me act like a big brother every once in a while,” Chris said.

A wave of embarrassment washed over me. Hearing him say that and seeing the mature look on his face, I felt as if I was behaving like a whining child. I couldn’t keep looking straight at him.

My head darted to the side, and I heard a faint laugh.

“I’m always so strict with you and Johan. I never get the chance to spoil you, so I am now,” Chris explained.

“That’s not true,” I countered.

He indulges me plenty. He goes to the effort of checking in on me, and he works me into his busy schedule. He’ll even remember all the little things that I mention in our conversations, and then send me books on those topics, along with some candy.

He might’ve not been great at expressing his love in words, but he didn’t need to; his actions and the looks he gave me spoke volumes. I knew very well how dear I was to him.

Those were my true feelings, but Chris’s smile nonetheless grew strained.

“It *is* true. Ordinarily at your age, you should still have the right to dawdle on your mother’s lap, but because of me and your parents, you can’t open up honestly about what worries you, or angers you, or saddens you.” Chris continued, laying his thoughts bare with rare sentimental words.

“Johan had you to talk to, but you don’t have anyone. In fact, you were forced to act even more mature, like an adult, because you had to protect Johan. And yet, everyone around you, including me, had convinced ourselves that you could handle it all. We forced you to accept our faith in you, and failed to give you the chance to complain.”

“Chris...” I said, dumbfounded.

“All of this burden pressing upon you, even though you’re still just a ten-year-old girl,” Chris said, stroking my hair.

He didn't seem used to acting this way—his palm was too firm and the action was clumsy. But even so, his touch was warm. His voice and gaze were affectionate and kind. For some reason, the corners of my eyes started to burn.

Why? I'm not sad. I don't have any negative emotions like anger or irritation right now.

The soft, warm sensation which had slowly enveloped my chest now rose to my eyes. Tears threatened to fall. I shrouded my face with my hands to hide my wavering watery gaze, and then Chris's finger brushed against my cheek.

"Tired?" he asked gently.

I feared that if I spoke, my voice would falter, so I only gave a slight nod in reply.

"Then sleep. Don't worry, I'll protect you tonight." The tender tone of Chris's voice caused my stiffened body to gradually relax.

However, the very next second, the shrill shattering of breaking glass erupted in the distance.

"What's that?!" I bolted upright, but Chris pressed his hand on me and stopped my motion before I could jump from the sofa.

"Ch-Chris?" I shot him a questioning look, wanting to know why he'd stopped me, but he slowly shook his head.

"It's all right," Chris told me, entirely composed.

"What is...?" I asked, stunned. "What's all right?!"

Chris had surely heard that noise too. He knows that something abnormal is currently happening. I don't even need to use the past tense—we can still hear it. The whole palace is in uproar.

There were furious shouts that called people to action, and the noise of many footsteps running past the door.

Clearly, something's going down, so what in God's name is all right about this situation?

"Stay here. *It's all right.*" Chris said again and looked straight at me. His eyes

met mine, and I saw no trace of discomposure, just myself reflected back at me. “Rose.”

“Ch-Chris...”

He pulled at my arm and held me in an embrace. One of my ears was pressed against his chest, and he covered the other ear with his palm, cradling my head in order to distance me from the commotion.

I couldn’t hear anything anymore except Chris’s heartbeat, and my own.

As Chris was protecting me in his embrace, *something* was happening. Something was being set in motion, and I ascertained that it probably had to do with the Lutz abduction plan.

What was more, Chris was probably aware of it. He could only act this calmly if all of the commotion was firmly within the boundaries of his expectations. Nobody had come to report the occurrence to Chris, so the royal guard must’ve predicted this too. They’d have probably informed Lutz and Teo as well, since they were the enemy’s targets.

The only one not aware, the only one kept in the dark...was me.

Just me, the waste of space.

A muffled cry escaped my mouth. Hot drops of water poured from my closed eyes and slipped down my cheeks.

What was I thinking? That I could actually do something? I’m powerless. Sure, I’ve got memories from my last life, and I know the future, but what good is that? I can’t do anything myself.

Talk about conceit, thinking I’d solve anything on my own. The fact that I need Chris to protect me is the rebuttal to all of that. I’m absolutely helpless.

“Don’t cry.” Chris’s bitter voice struck at my earlobes.

His hand slipped away from the ear it had covered and wiped at my cheek. “I still end up making you cry—whether I’m forcing my expectations onto you, or keeping you in the dark to protect you. Some big brother I am.”

“Don’t say that,” I mumbled with a watery tone.

Chris isn't at fault. I am.

I had neither the strength to live up to the faith he had placed in me, nor the flexibility to leave everything to him.

I could only manage half measures, so it was my fault.

I want to be stronger.

In addition to my irritation, a fierce longing welled up, deep inside of my heart.

The Sorcerers' Struggle

A large explosion roared, and the resulting shock wave shook the wagon.

"He's really going at it," I muttered. My offhanded opinion was decidedly casual for the situation, considering that I was sprawled inside of the wagon's freight compartment.

My whole body was sore from being laid across the hard floorboards for so long, and there was a tingling sensation beginning in my left arm, which was trapped beneath my body. I'd just about managed to roll onto my back, and I breathed a sigh of relief. That motion hadn't been easy with my arms and legs tied up—I was basically a caterpillar.

A fireball streaked across the sky with a woosh, barely visible through a gap where the wagon's canopy had curled up. Obviously, that magic hadn't come from me; I was still a caterpillar.

"He really is going at it." I muttered the same thing again, letting out a dry chuckle.

My—Teo Eilenberg's—current location was on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Nevel, on a mountain road near the border with the neighboring Kingdom of Vint.

It was nighttime, and three days had passed since the attempted murder of Hilde Kremer by suspected spy Nicholas von Buro. In that time, rebels had infiltrated the palace, abducted Lutz and me, stuffed us into sacks, and thrown us into the cargo compartment of a wagon for transport.

There wasn't much magic we could've used to hatch an escape, thanks to the power-restricting chokers we wore. We sorcerers didn't possess much physical strength either, so once our magic was sealed off, our avenue for struggle was closed.

I had not fancied collecting any bruises, so I'd resigned myself to sliding around the freight compartment like a sack of potatoes. However, the proud magical genius Lutz had different ideas.

Just under an hour after the wagon had begun its ascent up the uneven mountain road, my sack was opened. Lutz had tried to escape, and he'd been about to cut my bonds using a knife he'd hidden in the sole of his shoe. While he was doing this though, one of the rebels who'd followed on horseback noticed that something was amiss, so he'd halted our wagon.

Lutz didn't get a chance to cut my restraints, and left me to be a caterpillar as he prepared for a fight.

His only weapons were a knife small enough to fit inside his palm, and three magical gems, which were basically rocks infused with power. The gems weren't the easiest tools to use; only sorcerers with vast reserves of magic could handle them, and they would shatter and disappear after only a single activation.

These gems had been crafted by our teacher, Irene von Altman, so that Lutz had a means to defend himself even with his magic restricted.

And that's why there were currently fireballs shooting through the sky, despite fire magic being the complete opposite of Lutz's magical affinity.

The fireball from a moment ago had been the third one cast, marking the end of Lutz's gem supply. A little bit of time passed after that last spell before the canopy was flung open. A man turned up with scorch marks on the edges of his clothes, and he was carrying Lutz on his shoulder. Lutz had again been tied up.

"In you go!" said the man as he chunked Lutz violently into the freight compartment.

"Oof!" Lutz grunted as he landed.

Lutz's current state cut a pitiful figure. It looked as if they'd run a check to see whether he'd concealed any more weapons. His clothes were dirty, and there were quite a few new bruises on his pale skin. They'd taken his shoes away, leaving him with bare feet. On top of that, they'd tied him with rope from head to toe.

The glistening choker around his neck was the visual cherry on the disheveled cake.

The sight of it was so weird that I almost had to look away. Lutz's exceptional good looks did him no favors in this instance—he had the appearance of a

pretty boy who'd survived an unfortunate run-in with a pervert.

"Don't worry, Lutz. I'll tell the princess not to ask too many questions about the state of your anus."

"You'll have an icicle up yours before that happens." Lutz shot daggers at me in response to my lighthearted jest.

Looks like the moderate beating he took has done a good job of pissing him off. I shrugged my shoulders with a sigh, not feeling particularly remorseful over my joke.

"That's what you get for wasting your time and resisting," I said. "Just stay put. We have no chance of getting away without our magic anyway."

"Shut it," Lutz responded. "Don't tell me what to do." He turned his face away from me in a huff.

I mirrored the motion and rotated my body so that I was facing the opposite direction from Lutz, pretending to be fed up with him.

After a small delay, a man climbed into the cargo compartment. Until now, the rebels had prioritized the wagon's speed, and so they hadn't left anyone to watch us.

But after Lutz's escape stunt, they must have decided that we deserved closer observation.

"Do me a favor and don't make my day any harder," the man said, glaring at us.

I recognized him. He was Nicholas von Buro, a knight of the royal guard, and a traitor. He'd abandoned his duties to protect Nevel, and then turned on his master.

All in all though, he'd made things easier by coming to guard us himself.

"There's nowhere in this world for you anyway," Nicholas spat out. "You're best off sucking up to your owner and getting them to treat you nice." He made no effort to hide his contempt, and then broke into derisive laughter at our expense.

"I suppose so," I said with a complacent smile. "I'll be a good pet dog and

work my very best for my master.”

“That’s the spirit,” Nicholas chortled.

Okay. The plan’s working for the moment, it seems.

My whole monologue up to this point had followed a prearranged script.

The attack on the palace, our abduction, Lutz’s resistance and its failure—everything had proceeded exactly as laid out in the scenario designed by the first prince, Christoph von Velfalt.

Let’s turn the clock back by three days.

On the night that Hilde Kremer had suffered her wound, Lutz and I were escorted to a small and narrow room for questioning. Or at least that was the pretense.

After being ushered and crammed into the room, we were greeted by a gaggle of distinguished faces: the first prince, the captain of the royal guard, and our teacher, Miss Irene von Altman.

While we held our breath, the first prince announced to us that he wanted our assistance.

He provided us with a brief explanation and details of the conspiracy that was brewing under the surface—the king of Skelluts had concocted a scheme to abduct Lutz, and the person helping him was a knight in Nevel’s royal guard. The maid who’d been making approaches to Lutz also worked for that spy. And finally, the princess had discovered the maid just moments before the rebels could ensure Hilde’s eternal silence.

He told us everything.

At first, I was too overwhelmed to do anything. But as bits and pieces started to fit together in my mind, I felt the urge to give myself a good kick. I shot a look at Lutz by my side, and like me—no, worse than me—his face was distorted.

He’d hung his head and was biting his lips. His fists were clenched with all his might, and they were trembling slightly.

“So the princess...all this time, she was protecting us?” Lutz muttered in amazement.

He’d voiced the exact same thought that was in my mind.

The princess had been deeply interested in Lutz’s relationship with the maid. At first, I’d wondered whether her inquiries had stemmed from some age-appropriate fondness that young girls have for tales of romance. But she’d never seemed all that excited about the topic. If anything, I remembered her waiting for Lutz’s reaction uneasily.

Thinking back on it now, the princess was afraid. Afraid that Lutz would fall in love with the maid and find himself being used.

She’d taken so much time out of her busy schedule to spend hours upon hours with us—this was probably also for our sake. It was her way of bringing Lutz and me under the protection of her personal guard.

Such a little girl had stood in front of us, had stretched her arms out in a desperate attempt to protect us.

And what exactly did I do? I’d known that something was worrying her, but I hadn’t even stopped to think that maybe we were the cause of her trouble.

“I’m so pathetic.” I tried to laugh in order to smooth over my intense feelings of inadequacy, but I couldn’t even do that right. All that managed to escape my contorted lips was a hoarse sound.

“Why?!” Lutz asked, enraged. “Why did you entrust that job to the princess?! If someone had just told me about this, I wouldn’t have needed anyone else. I can protect myself!”

“Calm down, Lutz,” I responded. “You know it’s not as easy as that.”

Physically annihilating our enemies sounded simple, but that wasn’t a good enough plan.

After I rebuked him, Lutz ground his teeth and turned his face away, frustrated.

“My sister wasn’t acting on my orders. Although I will admit that, speaking in terms of results, I have made use of her.” The prince had been observing us

without revealing any emotions on his face, and he rebutted Lutz in a subdued tone.

What do you mean, “my sister wasn’t acting on my orders”?

I struggled to grasp what he was saying, and I expressed my question through my gaze. The prince looked down and heaved a long sigh.

“I did tell her to keep you both in her thoughts, but I said nothing more than that,” the prince revealed. “First of all, there’s no way I would’ve divulged precious information to a young princess, especially intel which could initiate a conflict on the scale of entire nations.”

I said nothing.

“She’s smart,” the prince declared. “And she takes the initiative. She’s capable of coming to her own conclusions, making decisions, and taking action so as to produce the optimal outcome. She can do all of this, regardless of whether she’s been ordered to or not.”

The prince continued, still straight-faced: “At times, the extent of my little sister’s excellence leaves me prone to the ridiculous delusion that she might actually be able to see the future. Although in this case, that competency of hers has worked against her—she’s embroiled herself in a conflict that she should never have been involved with.”

Lutz and I gaped at the prince’s explanation.

Taking his words at face value could only mean one thing: the princess had figured out our predicament with no orders from anyone and had taken action, all on her own initiative.

A young girl who’s only just reached double digits in age. She did all of that.

“Excellent” didn’t begin to describe her.

It should have been nearly impossible to connect the dots between the irregularities occurring in the palace. Even more than just that, the princess was able to draw the correct conclusion without any prior information. Her abilities truly verged on premonition.

“To confound matters even further, she’s caught even the king’s attention,”

the prince said.

“The king... You can’t mean—?!” I shouted, going pale.

“No. Nevel’s, not Skelluts’s,” the prince clarified immediately.

Oh, thank God. Just the thought of that blood-crazed War-Hungry King setting his eyes on the princess had drained the color from my face.

“By Nevel’s king, you mean, your...?” Lutz asked in bewilderment.

“That’s right,” the prince confirmed. “Our father. He doesn’t really see us as his children. He views us merely as subordinates who happen to be related to him. He’ll put us to work if he deems us useful, but otherwise he’ll set us aside. Unfortunately, my sister would’ve fared better if he’d deemed her useless.”

It sounds like the king has marked her down as “useful.”

The prince’s expression had remained inexpressive while he spoke, but bitterness tinged his voice. This whole situation must not have been to his liking.

“So he thinks she’s useful, but what exactly does he plan to make her do?” I asked.

“Act as bait,” the prince responded.

“What?!”

“You two are the enemy’s targets. But the rebels need to take a hostage in order to blackmail you both into performing to their will,” said the prince. “At the moment, even I agree that my sister is the one most suited for that role.”

“Use her as bait?” Lutz muttered, and his voice went hoarse. He must’ve been resisting an urge to jump down the prince’s throat. His face looked horribly savage.

“You’re out of your mind,” Lutz whispered.

Lutz’s attitude towards the prince was much too rude, though maybe it was a little late to be pointing that out. The rational part of my mind ordered me to stop him. My emotions, however, disobeyed, and no words of rebuke left my mouth.

To be honest, I felt the same way that he did.

“In other words,” I said, “you’re going to allow the princess to be abducted so that you can use her rescue as an excuse to capture all of the rebels.”

You’re out of your mind, Prince. She wasn’t born a princess to get caught up in something so stupid. We didn’t—I didn’t—stick by her side, just to drag her into all of this.

A terrible, ferocious impulse rose up from the pits of my stomach. My body temperature spiked suddenly in response. Heat gathered in my hands. The choker that was fastened around my neck let out an audible ping.

Suddenly, a flood of cold water washed over my head. Literally.

“Calm down, my silly apprentices.”

The slender beauty who’d directed the water at me let out a sigh as she watched my floundering. Her good looks presented themselves with an intelligent, bookish image—her black hair was tied neatly above her head, and a monocle glinted on her left eye.

Miss Irene von Altman, our teacher, had just been watching patiently until that moment. But in order to pull me back from the brink of anger, she’d summoned water with her magic and poured it over my head.

Her affinity was for fire magic, but she dumped water onto me with ease—none of Nevel’s other sorcerers could so effectively wield magic with the opposite affinity to their own.

“Like Prince Christoph would ever permit such a thing,” Miss Irene remarked.

“Huh?”

“However bland he may look, the prince thinks that his little sister is the cutest, most precious thing in the world,” she said.

“Miss Altman.” The prince glared at Miss Irene, telling her without words to keep her mouth shut. But he didn’t refute her assertion.

This whole time, I’d found his lack of expressions unsettling; I couldn’t work out what he was thinking. I’d felt outraged while watching him chatter dispassionately, even though the topic concerned a threat to his sister’s safety.

Aren't you worried about her? I'd thought. But maybe he's just not great at expressing his emotions, and that's all there is to it.

Once I realized that, and saw the look on his face, with his eyebrows heavily furrowed, I was convinced that Miss Irene had hit the nail on the head.

"Oops, how rude of me." Our teacher didn't flinch at the prince's cold glare. Rather, she sidestepped it with a broad grin.

As if he was aware that she could run circles around him in an argument, the prince let Miss Irene's discourtesy slide. He heaved a sigh, then continued his talk.

"I have no intention of drawing my sister any further into this matter," the prince said to Lutz and me. "That's why I need assistance from the both of you."

The wagon's speed had dropped while we were ascending the hills, but it suddenly began to pick up again. It seemed that we'd made it over the peak of the mountain pass.

While listening to the creaking wheels, which sounded as if they were on the verge of breaking, I recalled what the captain of the royal guard had said.

The captain had watched us nod without delay to the prince's request for assistance. He'd then retrieved a folded piece of paper from his pocket and splayed it across the top of an old desk.

It was a map. It displayed Nevel's northernmost reaches, which occupied part of a craggy mountainous region, where the borders of four other countries jostled for space.

He'd said that the shortest route from Nevel to Skelluts necessitated crossing those mountains. A journey to Skelluts without passing through a neighboring country would be impossible, no matter the route taken, but traveling along the mountain roads would minimize time spent in other countries.

By traversing the mountain roads rather than the highways of the flatlands, the rebels would also have a smaller risk of being spotted. At the same time, there was nowhere to escape from the mountain passes, so the probability that

the rebels might take a different route to Skelluts wasn't zero.

"That's where these come in," our teacher had piped up.

She'd dropped three magic gems into Lutz's palms, with an explanation that they could release fireballs. She'd instructed him to find any opportunity to resist, and then shoot them into the sky.

If we ended up taking the mountain path, he was to wait for about an hour after we'd begun our ascent; if we took the highways in the flatlands, he was to shoot them after we'd left the urban area.

She'd told him to base his decision on the noises outside, the evenness of the ground, and the angle of the wagon, as his vision would likely be impaired.

He was given plainly visible weapons—under no circumstances was he to use his own magic while resisting.

All of this was to lull the enemy into a false sense of security. That was also why the magic gems were of a fire affinity, a kind of magic that Lutz definitely couldn't use himself. I'd been warned not to take part in it, just to be safe.

When they'd restrained us in the palace, I hadn't put up much resistance, in order to dupe them into believing that all they'd need to control me was the choker.

Thanks to my passivity, it appeared that they'd given up on snatching the princess while they took us. The rebels must've reasoned that, if they had both me and Lutz, we could be used as each other's hostages.

Besides, the first prince had stayed by the princess's side throughout the raid, so they couldn't have tried anything to harm her. At that moment, her room had been the safest place in all of Nevel.

The prince had promised that he'd stop at nothing to protect the princess, so Lutz and I resolved to do everything in our power to resist, and to fight.

Let's go home soon. Back to where the princess is waiting for us.

In the wagon, something cold suddenly brushed against my neck. Still with his back facing me, Lutz had made a cut in the rope that tied my hands together, using a small blade of magically conjured ice. He then slipped the chunk of ice

into my hands, so I cut into the rope around my legs, feigning a change in posture. I then summoned heat to my hands and melted the ice.

After that, all that remained was to wait.

If we'd been traveling on the highways through the flatlands, we would've probably stopped to change horses at one of the towns along the way. But on the shortest route through the mountains, there was nothing to do but press forward. The horses, however, were already nearing their limit, and there was no time to take a break. Therefore, there'd probably be another group waiting for us somewhere with fresh mounts.

If the enemies waiting for us near the border of Skelluts and Vint were only hired goons, then Lutz and I would need to ride all the way to the castle of Skelluts to enact our plan.

I'd rather avoid that. The potential for a successful escape diminished the closer we were to the enemy's heartland.

But it's not certain that things will go that way—first of all, would the king really hand his hard-won new magical toys to people who might betray him at the drop of a hat? The king might instead send people he can trust, maybe a unit under his personal control. He'd have to take into account the fact that any pursuers would need to tread lightly while crossing two countries.

Am I naive to think that?

"Almost there," Nicholas muttered under his breath. He'd lifted up the canopy slightly, and his eyes were narrowed as he gazed absentmindedly at the passing scenery.

"At long last, the moment I've been waiting for is here," he declared. "Gone are the wretched days of my poverty. Gone are the times when everyone sneered at my family behind my back, saying that the Buros were counts in name only."

There was no regret or guilt present in his eyes. They burned with passion, glistening like those of a youth whose heart swelled with hopes of a new life.

The sight was altogether bizarre, given the current situation.

“You’re a monster,” Lutz muttered with an icy tone of voice.

“What?” Nicholas had heard him.

“You’re inhuman.” Lutz didn’t recoil from Nicholas’s glare; instead he returned a look which was just as frozen as his voice.

“Ha ha! Would you look at that,” Nicholas said, bemused. “You and your friend are the only monsters here, Lutz Eilenberg.”

“Nope. You are too,” Lutz said bluntly. “You’ve betrayed and thrown away your homeland, your king, your family, and your friends, and yet you don’t have a shred of remorse. You don’t feel the slightest affront to your conscience. That’s not what I’d call ‘human.’”

Without saying another word, Nicholas swung his foot in an arc towards Lutz, who was still laying on his side, and landed a hard kick onto Lutz’s shoulder from below.

“Oof,” Lutz whimpered.

With a blank face, Nicholas pressed his foot down on Lutz’s head. “Ridiculous. As if I’d consider those scum my family and friends. They’re nothing but rats to hold me back, and vermin who don’t appreciate my greatness.”

Nicholas put more pressure into his foot, grinding the sole of his shoe further against Lutz’s head. As Nicholas rambled, his eyes grew vacant, giving his appearance a deranged look.

“Is that how it is? *‘I don’t belong here.’* So that’s the story you tell yourself? How sad,” Lutz spat out with a smile.

Hats off to you Lutz, for withstanding the pain and not letting him see you squirm. But seriously, nobody told you to make him mad.

Nicholas’s hand grasped the sword on his hip.

I doubt he’ll go as far as to kill Lutz, but this situation isn’t good.

What now? What should I do?

I can’t afford to use magic. Should I physically stop Nicholas by tackling him? Or provoke him and divert his attention onto myself?

Just as panic began to set in and I moved to stand up, the wagon came to a halt with a tremendous jolt. I gathered that we'd reached the handover spot.

"Lucky you," Nicholas spewed with annoyance. "You get to live another day." He removed the hand from his sword, then lifted the canopy and exited the wagon.

I watched until his figure disappeared. The tension drained from my body and I heaved a lengthy sigh.

"Lutz, that wasn't good for my heart."

"What can I say?" he replied. "He got on my nerves."

"You're such a child," I said.

Lutz turned away without the slightest sign of remorse. *What a brat.*

Immediately after I'd cursed Lutz out, several men climbed into the wagon and dragged us along the floorboards to remove us.

"Get out!" one of them ordered.

The chilly night air pricked at my skin. This area was still gloomy, but the sky in the east was starting to brighten, signaling that dawn was encroaching. A copse of trees surrounded this location, reducing visibility.

While I was examining our surroundings, someone pushed at my back, causing me to stagger forward.

"You're here," said an unfamiliar male voice.

I raised my head.

Standing in front of me was a muscular man. His entire body was covered in jet-black armor, with the seams and edges of the plate gilded in stripes of gold. He wore a bull-horned helmet that mirrored the same design. The sluggish movement of his cape displayed its great weight—the outer fabric was dyed black to match the armor, although the lining was a dark red. On top of that, the fabulous black horse behind the knight was dressed in armor of the same design as its master.

Clearly, his outfit wasn't that of some ordinary soldier from the borderlands;

the elegant armor probably belonged to a unit under the War-Hungry King's personal control. The look projected strength, but also a complete lack of fashion sense.

Looks like we guessed right.

"His Majesty is waiting eagerly."

This black knight was a man in his mid-forties, and seemed to be the unit's commander. He stared at me, then at Lutz, and then put on a vulgar smirk.

There were only about ten subordinates behind him, but the whole bunch looked quite formidable, living up to my expectations of soldiers from the country ruled by the War-Hungry King. That physical prowess didn't appear to extend to their brains though—I judged that they were the type to solve all of their problems with their fists.

Well, if their minds worked like a normal person's, then they wouldn't have sworn to serve a madman king. If your king is a foolish despot who only cares for expanding his territory, and ignores the plight of his people and their living conditions, then you should hurry up and find a new king.

"Right, c'mere," the commander bellowed overbearingly, unaware of the ridicule he'd received in my mind.

Enemy knights took up place on either side of me and grabbed my arms violently. I shot a glance to my side upon hearing a small groan, and saw that Lutz had been similarly restrained.

Judging from the burlap sack that another man held in his hands, they planned to bag us up again. Their crude treatment provoked an emotion within me, one that skipped past anger and went straight to astonishment.

Don't you think you should be a bit gentler in handling the goods that your master desires? I wanted to joke, but I held it back.

"No! Get your hands off me!" Lutz shouted, continuing his performance.

"Hey! Keep him still!"

The knights held him down.

As thin as Lutz was, what meager resistance he could muster didn't amount to

much of an obstacle. Even so, Nicholas, who was standing next to Lutz and obviously filled with irritation, lifted his hand into the air.

There was a dull thumping sound.

“Argh!” groaned Lutz.

“Stop resisting! It’s futile,” Nicholas barked.

Lutz scrunched up his face in pain, and his white cheek was rapidly turning red.

Even my usually cool temper began to heat, and I was only watching. Although this was how our responsibilities had been divided, I couldn’t help but gnash my teeth as Lutz took all the beatings.

Hurry. Hurry the hell up! Come on!!!

I prayed in my mind, and just at that moment—

“Don’t move!!!”

—a firm voice rang out.

The cluster of trees shook violently. A unit of hidden soldiers burst from the foliage all at once, sending a rumble through the ground that shattered the pre-dawn tranquility.

“Wh-What’s happening?!”

Unrest spread throughout the ranks of the Skellutian knights.

A new group of soldiers with swords and spears had surrounded the entire area. They made for a superb sight, brandishing their large shields menacingly. Casting my eyes up, I saw soldiers perched on thick branches, with arrows notched in their bows, fixing their aim on the Skellutian knights below.

Color drained from the faces of our captors when they saw the position of the ambushers. Not a single rat could’ve slipped through the opposing formation.

One man marched forward from the group of ambushing soldiers.

He had a stern countenance and a muscular build, and must’ve been only a little older than thirty. His dark-gray plate armor exuded an imposing aura, and the sight of him there, with his cape billowing behind him, overflowed with

majesty. He was probably the commander of the ambush.

He sucked in a bellyful of air, then raised his voice: “This land is in our kingdom! I won’t allow you to enter without permission!”

His awe-inspiring voice resounded across the area. Behind him was a red flag, emblazoned with the emblem of an eagle with its wings spread wide; the cloth flapped behind the commander as though responding to his voice.

“This can’t be! Why are there soldiers from Vint here?” Nicholas groaned from beside Lutz. His face was pale.

That was right, after all. The insignia on the flag of the ambushing soldiers was the mark of the Kingdom of Vint, and not Nevel’s emblem. More than that, these men wore the armor of the elite soldiers in the capital’s knightly order, rather than the uniform of Vint’s border guards.

The Skellutian knights stood dumbfounded, unable to react to this impossible situation.

“Sir Fritz.”

The high-pitched voice of a prepubescent boy, which was the last thing anyone would’ve expected to hear in this place, reached my ears.

The man who’d been called Fritz—Vint’s commander, it seemed—turned back to the boy. This young man stood among a throng of swordsmen that seemed to protect him.

“Your Highness, I must apologize for involving you in a situation like this,” said Fritz.

“Please,” responded the boy, “I’m the one who forced you to allow my participation in this march.”

The boy had been addressed as a prince, and he possessed the good looks of an angel from a religious fresco. His golden hair looked as if it had been woven from sunlight, and his large eyes were framed by long eyelashes.

His features were almost indistinguishable from Princess Rosemary’s, but he somehow left a completely different impression. I sensed something like an unfathomable fearsomeness from his eyes, which glimmered blue with the

color of the ocean depths.

“You mustn’t let these foreign scoundrels trample on your country’s territory. Please, don’t mind me. Carry out your duties,” said the young boy, before gesturing to Lutz and me. “Those two, however, appear to be restrained. Please take custody of them.”

The boy announced all of this with a voice far more composed than his young age would suggest.

He was Johan von Velfalt, the princess’s younger brother, and the second prince of the Kingdom of Nevel, who’d left to study in Vint.

“This...can’t be! This is absurd!” Nicholas descended into sudden panic at the arrival of Prince Johan, someone who, by all counts, shouldn’t have been there.

A line of sweat ran down his cheek and his eyes widened in astonishment. The hand he’d placed on his sword’s hilt was quivering. He staggered backwards, gait unsteady, and then his foot snagged on a tree root and he tripped.

All of our gazes fell on Nicholas as he stumbled, and Prince Johan narrowed his eyes in suspicion. He raised his fingers to his chin and sank into silence for a few seconds, as if trying to remember something.

Then he nodded a few times and spoke up.

“Ah, Nicholas,” said the prince.

Nicholas froze.

“Your Highness, you know this man?” Vint’s commander asked.

“He’s Nicholas von Buro, a knight in Nevel’s royal guard,” answered Prince Johan. “Nicholas, what are you doing there?”

Caught in Johan’s blue eyes, which seemed able to peer through all lies, Nicholas gulped. It looked like he was frantically trying to think of an excuse, but hadn’t he realized?

However much he struggled, the game was already over.

Vint’s capital knights had held military exercises at this exact time, and the second prince of Nevel had joined them on their march. They’d purposely

chosen this route from among the many others, and had reached the handover point before the Skellutian detachment's arrival. This couldn't have all been a miraculous coincidence.

Everything had proceeded according to a prearranged plan.

Unbeknownst to Nicholas, he'd played his scripted role, doing nothing more than dancing to the tune of the princes—both the younger one here, and the older, who was currently back at the palace protecting the princess.

"Those two boys fit the descriptions of the sorcerers in my brother's letters."

Prince Johan's remark was met with silence.

"Nicholas, why are they bound? Why are you traveling with rebels?" The prince commanded with all the power of his station, "Answer me, Nicholas von Buro!"

As the prince pressed him further, Nicholas's shoulders flinched. He hung his head, and despair flooded his gaze. Nicholas bit his bottom lip, trembling like a scolded child.

"...up," Nicholas murmured, in a voice too soft for anyone to truly make out the words.

"Has the heir to an honorable family of counts really sunk to the level of a traitor?" the prince muttered contemptuously.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!!!" Nicholas finally screamed. "You don't know me! You talk pretty big for a fragile, pampered little brat who has spent his whole life closely guarded, don't you?!"

Nicholas was ranting hysterically. The ability to make rational decisions appeared to have deserted him by this stage in the conversation. He'd just thrown away any chance of wriggling out of this; his honed silver tongue had done him no favors.

He was losing his grip on his identity as a member of the royal guard, even as a citizen of Nevel. The end result of his tantrum was catastrophic—he'd begun to lavish insults on a prince from his own kingdom.

Despite this, Nicholas continued shouting. "You royals! Kids with pretty faces,

but what else? Fuck-all, that's what! Every last one of you treats me like a fool!"

"How dare you! That's no way to speak to His Highness!"

It wasn't Prince Johan, but Vint's commander who flew into a rage at Nicholas's barrage of curses. Fritz grasped the hilt of his blade, but the prince cautioned him.

"Don't," stated Prince Johan.

"But, Your Highness."

"It's fine, Sir Fritz. There's nothing for you to gain by dirtying your hands over the ravings of this lowlife," explained the prince.

"Wha...?!" Being referred to as a lowlife caused Nicholas to completely lose his tongue.

That must've stung. Nicholas took pride in the fact that the blood of a comital lineage ran through his veins, even while he shunned his family. And here he was, being looked down upon from towering royal heights, ridiculed as a lowlife who wasn't even worthy enough to cut down.

"I'll take that man back to Nevel and submit him to the judgment of our law. Fortunately, we have no shortage of charges." Prince Johan pointed a sharp gaze at the traitor.

"Nicholas." Prince Johan addressed him curtly.

"Wh-What?!"

"You accused me of ignorance a moment ago, so I'm sure that you, of all people, are well aware of what it means to direct verbal abuse towards me, the second in the line of succession for the throne of the Kingdom of Nevel."

An ice-cold sneer emerged on Prince Johan's angelic, adorable features. The sight of him passing judgment without raising his voice, or even looking angry, packed a harder punch than should be possible for such a young boy.

Nicholas was outclassed and overawed. A quiet, strangled scream parted from his lips.

"Have it your way," remarked the prince. "Your destination won't be a fancy

mansion—it'll be a cell. But not to worry, you won't reside there for too many days, I expect. What was it that you called us? 'Kids with pretty faces and fuck-all else'? Well put! But you'll pay with your life for mocking my sister."

His tone made me shudder. The words had been directed at Nicholas, not me, but I broke out in goosebumps all the same.

How could anyone look at this prince and think that he was a fragile, pampered brat with a lovely face and nothing else? Do your eyes actually work? I wanted to shout at Nicholas.

Despite Nicholas's prior appraisal, all that the little prince had to do was take one step forward. Nicholas let out a pathetic shriek of terror.

"No! Stop! Stay back!"

Nicholas retreated, but the moment he spotted Lutz nearby, he tugged the boy towards himself in a violent motion. He took firm hold of Lutz, and his trembling hands unsheathed his sword and pressed it against the nape of Lutz's neck.

"You bastard!" Vint's commander cursed.

"D-Don't move!" Nicholas barked, huffing and puffing. "Not if you want this brat in one piece!" He growled and glared at everyone like an angry dog.

On cue, the Skellutian knights broke free from their dazed, statue-like states and proceeded to move, spurred on by Nicholas's actions.

"You too, get over here!" Following Nicholas's lead, a Skellutian knight grabbed my arm. He placed his blade crudely against my neck, slicing minutely through the thin layer of skin in the process. A single trickle of blood flowed out of the cut.

That hurts, asshole!

I was dragged before Prince Johan like a human shield.

"Your Highness." The commander of Vint's soldiers looked to Prince Johan at his side and called out for orders.

"Sir Fritz, I beg you not to take action." The prince replied briefly, his tone composed. His large eyes were free of panic or pity. If anything, they expressed

quite an aggressive stance.

His order for Fritz to halt was most likely a show of strength—it wasn't necessarily intended to ensure mine and Lutz's safety, but instead, to signal that there was no need for Vint's soldiers to take part in bloodshed at all.

He's saying that Nevel can clean up its own mess.

The young and cute figure of the prince signaled his order with a simple shift of the muscles in his jaw.

Do it. I felt I could see that command in his eyes.

This prince is frightening. Is he really related to the princess?

"Come no closer! Not if you value their lives!"

The Skellutian knights rattled off the sort of line a stereotypical villain would use, all the while failing to notice the unwavering calmness in the prince.

I almost sighed from a sense of disappointment, but I hardened my face to fit in with the atmosphere of the situation. My partner, on the other hand, had no intentions of fitting in.

"So loud... Do you mind not shouting right by my ear?" Lutz grumbled with a lackadaisical attitude. He frowned, and covered his ears.

I couldn't help but laugh at how naturally he'd appeared to remove the ropes that were supposed to be restraining him.

Nicholas's eyes shot open wide in sheer disbelief. "What?!"

"Just asking, but are you an idiot?" questioned Lutz. "I don't think you could've found two people more unsuited to being hostages than us." Lutz looked down and shrugged his shoulders, as though tired of Nicholas, then let out an exaggerated sigh.

Lutz blinked slowly. When his eyes reopened, their color was changed—no longer the usual indigo, his eyes had shifted to a silver-gray.

There was a plinking sound, and suddenly, Nicholas's sword flew from his hands. The blade followed a circular arc through the air before planting itself deeply into the ground, just a little distance away from us.

“Wha—?!” sputtered Nicholas.

Lutz’s fingers scythed through empty space, and traces of cold mist hung in the air following his gestures. Flakes of ice descended all around, sparkling in the light of the rising sun.

“What...What did you do?!” Nicholas asked in utter disarray, his voice hoarse.

“If you didn’t already catch what I did, then there’s truly no hope for you,” Lutz spat back. He directed a look of abject pity at Nicholas, and the ends of his faint lips twisted upwards.

The blatant provocation plucked perfectly at Nicholas’s nerves, and he unleashed an aggravated cry of anger.

“You bastard!”

With sparks flashing in his eyes, Nicholas grabbed the dagger that hung from his belt, and hurled its sheath away. He swung the blade down diagonally from the left, and it found its mark in Lutz’s slender body.

Or so it seemed.

At the last second, Lutz had caught the blade in his palm. He wasn’t even wearing gloves, but the sharp blade he gripped hadn’t cut into his skin.

Nicholas looked astounded, and was unable to comprehend what was happening.

Lutz smirked at him, then summoned all of his strength and ripped the dagger out from where it had bitten into his palm. After he’d hurled the dagger into the distance, he shook his fist.

The ice that had covered Lutz’s hand shattered with a noise reminiscent of trampling on frozen grass. The shards crumbled down to the ground.

“Surprisingly, my power works just as well for defense as it does for offense,” Lutz muttered. He repeatedly opened and closed his hand, like he was checking on his sense of touch.

“Magic?!” asked Nicholas, bewildered. “That’s impossible!”

The Skellutian soldiers, along with their commander dressed all in black,

suddenly thrust their swords towards Lutz in unison.

Apparently, one glimpse of Lutz's bizarre power had struck terror into the hearts of these seasoned veterans who'd weathered countless conflicts. Fear robbed them of their better judgment, and their composure was evidently broken.

"This early-morning mountain spot is great. I've got more water than I could ask for. I get to test out all sorts of tactics with a single type of attack." Lutz whispered this in a sing-song tone, then raised his hands aloft.

Something like a thick mist emerged from the ground and spread out in a circle, steadily enveloping the men's feet.

This mysterious substance inflamed the Skellutians' fear. Several of those surrounding Lutz let out deranged screams and slashed at him from all directions. But both Lutz and Prince Johan, who was watching patiently, just stood still and composed.

Neither showed the slightest hint of alarm.

"How do you like this?!" Lutz stamped his foot heavily on the ground, and the attacking men's legs froze solid in an instant.

With their movement blocked, the men collapsed in place. The soldiers from Skelluts writhed around, their hefty armor interfering with all attempts to free themselves.

Despite the successful execution of his magic, Lutz brought his hand to his chin and grumbled, dissatisfied.

"Hmm, the range of effect is limited, and there's quite a high probability that they could dodge the second burst. There's a lot of room for improvement."

I can't believe this guy! He's actually experimenting with his magic in a real fight. Who knew his nerves were made of this much steel, I thought. I was exasperated with my friend, but also impressed.

"Okay then, what to try out next?" The enjoyment in Lutz's voice terrified the collapsed men.

With their feet frozen, they couldn't even retreat by crawling away, so they

pummeled at their frozen legs with their fists, appearing half-crazed.

“How?!” Nicholas asked, his voice practically a scream. “What happened to the magic-restricting devices you’re wearing?!”

Lutz tilted his head. “Oh, this?” He pointed to his slender neck, where he wore a thin choker, which was a dark gray that matched his current eye color. He swiveled his hands around to the back of his neck, and released the clasp with the tips of his fingers.

The choker unfastened without any resistance and fell away, tumbling to the ground with a satisfying tinkling noise.

Despair washed across the faces of the Skellutians as they watched in astonished silence.

“As you can see, it’s a fake.” Lutz showed off his most marvelous grin.

Cries of terror rang out. The men abandoned their pride and fled from Lutz, charging instead in my direction.

Uhh, excuse me? It looks like they’ve all forgotten that I’m here too. No thanks to a certain somebody.

I let out a long sigh as I glanced at Lutz. He was going wild, as though releasing years of pent-up anger.

“Jeez, Lutz, don’t go nuts without inviting me!”

The man restraining me was distracted by Lutz, so I took advantage of his loosened grip on my arm and pulled it free.

I then plunged the heel of my palm into his jaw.

He groaned. His sword dropped with a clanging sound, and I planted the sole of my boot on the blade. I then thrust my elbow at the face of the soldier on my other side.

“Whoa!”

But he dodged right away.

While tutting at myself for letting the man leap back, I summoned all of my strength and tore apart the rope binding me. I blinked slowly, and I knew

without looking that my eyes had turned golden.

I gathered heat in my hands.

The rope suddenly ignited, and flames rose up with an audible woosh.

My captor whimpered, voice strained, as he turned his eyes to look at the fire burning right in front of him.

I sent him one cold glance, then piled my now-free hands on top of each other and amassed heat.

I kneaded the nearby air together, and allowed the lit flame to spread, just moments before the remnants of rope finished burning and fell away as ash. The pale fire I'd conjured illuminated the area with its dazzling glow. The blazes devoured a good chunk of my magical energy, and the brightness increased dramatically.

The licks of fire then coiled around my right arm like a snake.

I breathed a sigh of relief at my accomplishment, and I felt like I heard Lutz laugh from the other side of the men who divided us.

Screw you, Lutz. A genius like you could never understand what it feels like to be normal.

You might be able to wield your magic like it's nothing, but I can't! Without a conjuring medium, I can't seem to get the image right in my head. What's so wrong with being relieved that my spell worked? I snarled in my mind.

Unaware of my internal conflict, our captors were on the verge of fainting from the terror of being stuck between two sorcerers.

"Now this one too?!" a Skellutian knight shouted, dumbfounded.

"Stop!" implored our captors. "Leave us be!"

A bitter smile broke out across my face. *You're the ones that kidnapped us. Maybe you should've left us be.*

There's no hope for the mad king or his underlings if they trifled with us without comprehending what makes sorcerers so special.

"We should be the ones telling *you* to leave *us* be," Lutz retorted, furrowing

his brow and displaying his scorn for all to see.

He hadn't raised his voice, but even so, an unconcealable anger had seeped into his tone and facial expression. "You were meant to capture us! But look at the sorry state you're in now, sir knights."

The late-middle-aged commander ground his teeth, pride wounded after hearing the scornful laugh of a child too young to even be his own son.

"You mock us?!" Fear had dulled the commander's eyes before, but now flames of indignation swelled inside them. He glared at Lutz with his blazing stare and placed a hand on his sword's hilt. He yanked the huge sword from its sheath and brandished it with both hands, then leapt forward.

"You're getting carried away, boy!" the commander howled.

The man careened his sword down, aiming for Lutz's head, but my partner evaded the attack by a hair's breadth.

"Whoa?! Almost!" Lutz said.

The swing sent shock waves rippling through the air and gouged a massive rift in the ground. The movement itself hadn't been all that swift, but the force behind the blow deserved a gasp.

"Ooh, scary!" Lutz's lighthearted attitude wasn't deterred, even though one wrong step would've earned him a fatal wound.

"That's what you get for provoking him, dummy," I chided.

They were ready to fall apart from their fear of our mysterious power. We could've saved ourselves all of this bothersome effort.

I found myself grumbling. Lutz shot me a glance with narrowed eyes, as if expressing to me that I just didn't get it.

"Bullying the weak isn't my style," Lutz declared, looking deadly serious. The Skellutian knights bridled at his words.

"Sure, whatever you say," I replied. Hearing the low growl of the knights, I sighed, feeling something close to resignation.

Anger had bolstered the Skellutian men's morale. The knights had finally

clambered to their feet, and I knew that they wouldn't go down so easily this time.

"Little kids like you don't get to toy with us anymore!" yelled the knights in a rage. "We'll send you straight to hell, you monsters!!!"

Monsters.

That word sent a tremor through Lutz's shoulders.

Although I was used to having that insult thrown my way, it still forced a reaction from me every time. Lutz was the same. Fortunately, the response was basically like a reflex, and the affront didn't eat away at our hearts the way it used to.

"Not the most original of insults."



“Well, we were born monstrous after all.” Both of us laughed, our eyes cold. We were able to laugh. After all, we weren’t so sweet as to squirm underneath the words of nobodies.

Lutz, Teo.

A lovely voice replayed in my mind.

Someone exists who’ll call our names with a smile. Someone who’s waiting for our return.

I don’t have to worry about who I am anymore.

I’m a monster. A monster called Teo.

This power that I can summon to protect those I hold dear is something to rejoice in. I’ll never balk at it again.

“Bring it on, old men,” Lutz said.

“We’ll give you a good taste of the power that your master asked for.”

The Reincarnated Princess Suffers Anguish

The long, long night finally came to an end.

The palace grounds were still in an uproar. Patrolling knights kept careful watch of their surroundings, and the maids were huddled together in fear.

Chris had stayed by my side until dawn, and then he'd left to attend a meeting.

He'd hardly slept at all. Lutz and Teo still hadn't returned. There was nothing that I could do.

I knew that I should've remained in my room, but I couldn't bear to stay there. If I holed up in one place, all of my worst fears plagued my mind, gnawing at my sanity. So instead, I took Klaus with me and headed for the greenhouse.

I'd grown accustomed to coming here; it was tranquil, and far away from the tumult of the palace.

I examined the inside of the room, which was still neat and tidy, with no signs that it had been disturbed by the rebels. As I glanced up at the lofty glass ceiling, the bright sunlight shining through the gaps in the clouds forced me to squint. When I took a step forward, even the sound of my small footstep echoed clearly throughout the room, and a tight pain gripped my chest.

I never knew this room could be so spacious, so quiet.

The temperature in the room felt colder from the lack of people, from the absence of friends to welcome me in and say hello. I bit my lips and hung my head.

"Lady Rosemary," Klaus called out. I could hear the concern in his voice from where he stood behind me.

I came back to my senses and put on a brave face.

I didn't walk all the way to the greenhouse just so I could act gloomy and depressed in front of Klaus. I'd been selfish and had him escort me out of my room, so I've got to at least do what I can while I'm here.

“I’ll water the plants,” I said. “You can wait there.”

“Allow me help you in what little way I can,” Klaus offered.

“I’m fine, Klaus,” I insisted. “I’m only going to water them, and I can do that by myself.” I turned around and gave him a smile, but his expression was dark.

“I won’t get in your way, so please...” he almost pleaded.

“Klaus?”

Shock filled my eyes—he hardly ever sounded so softhearted. His usually dignified eyebrows were drooping, his voice lacked spirit, and his sentence had trailed off. An uncomfortable feeling washed over me, like I’d been bullying this man, who was twice my age and twice as tall.

“Your complexion has looked poor since this morning,” said Klaus. “Please, don’t push yourself.”

Hearing that statement, I finally realized how much I’d made him worry about me. I’d looked so despondent this morning that not even Klaus, as overprotective as he was, could bear to confine me within my room.

I examined my reflection in the mirror behind Klaus. A lack of sleep had drained my face of color, giving me a ghostly appearance. The redness around my eyes caused by crying had faded slightly after I’d washed my face with cold water, but there was still a stinging pain present.

I look horrible. No wonder Klaus is acting so empathetic. But I don’t want to give up on watering the plants, so I’ll endure my feelings of guilt and take him up on his offer.

I made up my mind and was about to call out to him, but at that exact moment, I heard another voice.

“I thought I might find you here.” That relaxed mezzo-soprano tone sounded familiar. “What am I going to do with you?”

The woman furrowed her beautiful eyebrows, and her shiny, red-painted lips formed a wry smile. Beyond the monocle, her obsidian eyes shone with the affectionate light of a mother scolding her child.

“Miss Irene,” I said.

The intellectual beauty, Miss Irene von Altman, had entered the room. She was Lutz and Teo's sorcery instructor, and also my medicine and astronomy teacher.

"I know that you're going to be feeling restless, but pushing yourself until you collapse will lose you everything," Miss Irene stated.

"But, the plants," I tried to argue. "They still haven't been watered." I didn't want to give up, but Miss Irene set me straight with some sound reasoning.

"I've already done the plants that need watering daily," she explained. "The rest can withstand a few dry days. I want you to spend more time looking after your own body, rather than the medicinal herbs."

Well, I never assumed that I could out-argue Miss Irene to begin with.

I fell silent and cast my head down, but then I felt like I heard her laugh. Even I could tell that I was acting childishly; the embarrassment made it doubly hard to lift my head back up.

Miss Irene walked towards me, and the sharp clicking of her high heels echoed through the room. The moment that the tips of her shoes entered my downcast field of view, she clasped my hand and raised it up. Her slender, icefish-like fingers enveloped my own.

This unexpected action caused me to glance up suddenly, and I saw that Miss Irene was smiling gently at me.

"Why don't we go back to my room and have some tea?" she offered. "It'd be nice to have a chat every once in a while, just us girls."

Without waiting for me to return to my senses and nod, Miss Irene led me by the hand to her quarters.

My first impression of Miss Irene's space matched my perception of her exactly. Since the room was inside of the palace, the ornamentation on the walls and the ceiling differed little from the other rooms—however, a carpet of dark-blue fabric adorned with silver geometric figures was splayed across the floor, and a walnut bookcase encompassed the entire length of one of the walls. Overall, the decor gave the room a relaxed atmosphere.

She'd neatly tidied the surface of her work desk—only a few objects rested on it, as though the desk had never seen any use. However, a glance at the antique pen and the more-than-half-empty ink pot made it clear that her workspace saw much action. Looking at each bookshelf, I saw that all of the volumes had been systematically organized by field, giving insight into their owner's meticulous personality.

"Have a seat." Miss Irene gestured to the sofa, and I sat down. "Here you are." She placed a simple, white teacup in front of me and poured some light-orange-colored tea, then sat down opposite me.

"Thank you," I expressed my gratitude, and then picked up the cup. A unique fragrance, slightly sweet, wafted into my nostrils.

Is this chamomile?

I puffed on the tea to cool it down, then took a sip. The smooth fragrance spread across my palate, leaving a clear and pleasant aftertaste. I let out a little breath, and my shoulders eased up slightly.

Now that I think about it, I seem to remember somebody telling me that chamomile has a relaxing effect.

"Yummy..." The words just slipped out. Miss Irene's smile broadened.

"This tea's made from a flower, apparently. Why don't you and my apprentices try growing them in the greenhouse some time?" She suggested it plainly, while tilting her teacup.

My breathing stopped.

With her apprentices. She'd said those words like everything was obvious. Not a wish, but an indisputable fact backed up by evidence.

Rippling waves propagated along the amber-colored surface of my tea as it shook. After a few seconds of delay, I realized that my hands holding the cup were trembling, and they were to blame for the disturbance.

"That...sounds nice." My voice faltered. Despite my desire to at least reply with a smile, I couldn't even raise my face. "The tea smells lovely, and I think that if we added some honey, Lutz would like it. I don't think that Teo's fond of

strong smells, so it might not be to his preference.”

“Princess.”

I continued, words spilling from my mouth: “I have a feeling that Teo would be more interested in the growing stage. He’s good with his hands, and has a keen sense of taste, so maybe the cooking side—”

“*Princess.*”

My hand had gone stiff. Miss Irene covered it with her own.

She guided my wrist down, so I could place the teacup on the table, then wrapped her hands around both of mine, as she had in the greenhouse. My stiffness melted away slightly, all from the warmth that slowly traveled from her skin to mine.

“You don’t need to force yourself to look happy,” she said. “If things are tough, then it’s all right to say so.” Her voice was kind. Her speech was metered and paced, which was unlike her. Usually, she would always talk in the most efficient way possible.

Her hand, clasping mine from above, tapped a steady rhythm on my palm. The action was very similar to what a mother does when trying to get her child to sleep.

“Cry if you want to,” she told me. “Crying is proof of a healthy soul.”

There was a sharp pain, deep in the back of my nose. I took as big of a breath as I could, and at the last moment staved off the oncoming tears.

I’ve already cried my eyes out. Isn’t it past time for my tear ducts to have dried up? I thought, frustrated at myself.

“I won’t cry,” I declared.

Right now, I don’t want to cry while reminiscing about the two of them. I won’t jinx it. They’re coming home. They are.

“Oh, how lucky those boys are,” Miss Irene muttered, as if to herself.

“Huh?”

“My apprentices are blessed to have you feeling so full of concern over

them,” she clarified.

I couldn’t bring myself to agree that they were blessed.

“What’s...” With my face still turned down, I wrung out my voice.

What’s so great about me being concerned for them? Of course I’m gonna be worried. That’s obvious. I’d act worried all day long if that could make them happy. It won’t though. My concern isn’t enough to balance out all of the bad occurrences. Concern doesn’t even begin to tip the scales.

I’d never learned of their upbringing, or how they’d lived before arriving at the palace, but I was sure that they’d experienced more than their fair share of hardship. Reflecting on the standard treatment of sorcerers in Nevel, I couldn’t imagine that their lives thus far had been spent in peace.

I don’t think that I can measure other people’s happiness according to my personal scale, but I can’t see it from any other perspective.

“I’m sure that their innate powers have forced them to suffer more hardship than the average person,” Miss Irene said, as though she’d read my mind. “But nevertheless, they have someone like you who understands them, and that by itself makes them fortunate. Children born with magical powers all grow up missing something, be it connections with others, or relations of trust. Most of them never experience parental love.”

Miss Irene’s story was horribly grave. The two sorcerers’ faces popped into my mind. They’d told me that they were raised in an orphanage.

“Nobody can tell whether a baby has magic. Even so, there might be something which sets them apart from normal babies. Many of the magical children are abandoned before their minds have even begun to develop. The ones raised by their own families face ostracism and fear from their parents, and most always end up closing off their hearts. The price we pay for tremendous power is usually the ability to make real bonds with others. Those two are lucky ones, because they had each other. Still though, they have a habit of avoiding contact with people. I think that should ring a bell, no?”

Miss Irene asked her question, and I gave a small nod.

When we’d first met, Lutz had acted like a wounded cat. He’d bare his claws,

as if posturing that he would dig them into me if I were to try and touch him. He'd flee the moment I tried to approach him.

Teo had been more personable, but there had still been an emotional barrier there.

"Lutz and Teo are both diligent in their studies, and have never shied away from putting in the effort to become fully-fledged sorcerers. Yearning for somewhere to belong, they both did their best in their own way, I'm sure. But, even if they master control over their magic and acquire the rank of sorcerer, it still won't fill the hole in their hearts. Wounds suffered from interactions with people can only be healed by interacting with people."

Miss Irene paused, and I said nothing, taking in her words before she continued.

"The boys probably understood that concept in their heads, but translating thought to action is exceptionally difficult. Everyone's afraid of being hurt. After all, it's far easier to nurse an old wound and keep running away."

Miss Irene cast her eyes down after she'd finished speaking. There was an ever-so-slight bitterness in her smile, and a realization popped into my head.

She might've experienced the same thing.

"But you were there for them," Miss Irene said, and her expression brightened.

"Me?" I asked.

"That's right," she stated. "Though they fled from you and rejected your initial outreach, you nonetheless remained a friend who'd chase after them and take part in their lives. I'd call that a blessing."

I lost my composure after hearing Miss Irene's words. I reflexively shook my head and protested, "I'm not worthy enough to have you say that, not at all."

I mean, there's nothing I've even managed to do for those two boys.

I had kept stirring up conversation, undeterred by their rejection, but that was all. And the whole reason I'd approached them to begin with was rife with calculation; I'd only wanted to preserve the peace around me.

I was no otome game heroine. I wasn't that pure. In my soul, there was no compassionate desire to heal their wounded hearts.

"I'm a selfish, self-centered person. My purpose for reaching out wasn't for them. I was only thinking about myself." I forced out the words and prepared for an inevitable rebuke. But my desperate repentance was dismissed with a laugh.

"But you know," Miss Irene mused, "humans are all selfish creatures."

"Huh?"

"Show me one person who makes choices without any thought of profit or risk. We all put ourselves first. Princess, what matters in the end is the result, not the reason."

This talented woman watched my mouth gape, and then laughed heartily.

"I don't know what thoughts compelled you to strive so hard to be a friend to them. But thanks to you, my apprentices have begun to smile like other children their age," she said warmly. "To me, that's everything."

"Miss Irene..." I murmured.

She pulled her hands from their embrace around mine, and gazed at me, her expression serious. Then she slowly bowed her head.

"My apprentices are only good for making you worry, but please, believe in them. Wait for their return. No matter what, they'll come back to you."

"Y-Yes," I stammered.

My tear ducts were threatening a second rupture, and I hurriedly shunted my face up.

I won't cry. Not yet.

Not until I see them safe and sound.

Not until I greet them with a "welcome home."

The Return of the Sorcerers “I’m beat,” I remarked. Gazing up at the blue sky from the saddle of a horse, I listened to the tranquil clip-clop of my mount’s hoofbeats as it trotted along.

There was no reply.

Lutz rode beside me on his own horse, but his utterly lifeless eyes were fixed dead ahead.

Looks like he’s too worn out for chitchat.

Our sense of fatigue was tremendous. We’d endured a forced march while left to roll around in the cargo compartment of a wagon, fired off a good deal more magic than we were used to, and as a kicker, we’d spent the whole time in a state of heightened anxiety.

At this point, even moving a single finger took effort. I had to concentrate in order to stop my eyelids from falling shut.

At any rate, right now, sleep couldn’t come soon enough.

In the end, the Kingdom of Vint took the Skellutian king’s personal unit into their temporary custody. What remained was a problem to be dealt with by the countries involved, and so our roles had come to an end.

Lutz and I had also illegally entered the Kingdom of Vint, albeit not by any choice of our own, but the two princes of Nevel must’ve sorted that issue out somehow.

We were on our way home after only a perfunctory questioning. A group of knights had been assigned as our escort, and after they’d greeted us, they’d relayed the prince’s instruction for us to spend the night in one of the border fortresses.

However, we’d strongly protested.

If I'm gonna sleep anywhere, I'd rather rest comfortably in my own bed.

Knights are sticklers for obeying orders, but they'd said no more and their hesitancy had immediately disappeared after Lutz had grinned and mumbled, "This'll be my first time losing consciousness without my choker on, but I'm sure you'll agree to overlook any explos—*ahem*—anything that might happen."

Lutz had appeared far more languid than me, and it seemed that he'd wanted his own bed too.

"Don't get too carried away though," I'd warned with a strained smile. "Too many threats and we'll lose our spot in the palace. Neither of us want that."

In a rare sight, Lutz had nodded obediently.

Up until now, I'd worried that Lutz had lost consciousness in his saddle, because he'd barely moved at all. Suddenly, he piped up: "I want..."

I glanced at him, curious to hear what he'd say.

"I want to hurry up and get home," he continued, his absentminded gaze still fixed on the horizon ahead. The small utterance that escaped his lips was something that anyone would say, but I'd never heard that phrase roll from Lutz's tongue.

Lutz and I had first met in an orphanage, the summer we'd both turned seven.

If I had to distill my first impression of him into one word, it would be "distant."

His silver hair, nearly white, and his alabaster skin were both so pale that he could've blended in and vanished among the elderflowers planted in the orphanage's garden. His limbs had been so thin that I'd thought he must be a few years younger than me. The only spots on his body with any hue were his indigo-blue eyes, and even those lacked vigor.

His entire existence had seemed paper-thin.

What sort of upbringing creates such a distant person? I'd thought. I'd promptly found the answer to that doubt of mine after hearing the story of his upbringing.

Lutz had told me that he'd lived his early years hidden away from the world. The only ones that had known of his existence were his parents. He'd been kept a secret from his grandfather and grandmother, who lived far away, as well as from everyone in his neighborhood.

That struck me as odd, because it should've been impossible to know anything about a newborn baby's magical potential. But Lutz possessed a truly absurd amount of power, so maybe there'd been some omen present when he was still a baby.

Many sorcerers, including myself, experience a change in their eye color when they activate their magic. Mine would turn from red to gold, and Lutz's from blue to silver. He would've had hardly any power as a baby, so if there'd been hints of magic, it would've only been in tiny amounts. Certainly not enough to be perceptible through the normal five senses.

However, I'd be willing to bet that his eyes had changed color.

From that, his parents must've noticed his potential as a sorcerer, and they'd resolved to lock him away. Unfortunately, my speculation was nothing more than educated guesswork, as his parents had both already passed away.

Lutz had grown isolated after his admittance to the orphanage, and had refused to open his heart to any of the other children. That became a negative feedback loop though, where he'd reaped what he'd sowed—his isolation came from actively ignoring anyone who'd tried to strike up conversation with him. I'd been just about the only person who went out of their way to spend time by his side.

As for me, I'd apparently been abandoned in front of the orphanage right after my birth, so my time there had been longer than most of the other children. The little 'uns had looked up to me like a big brother figure, but in my heart I'd never truly accepted them as family. It was probably because of the faint awareness that I'd been cut from a different cloth.

The more they'd adored me, the more scared I'd grown of the day they'd turn their backs on me. At times I'd feel horrible, like I was suffocating.

But when I was with Lutz, I'd felt like I could breathe easier, just a little, all thanks to the indifferent attitude that he'd maintained towards me and

everyone else. Because of that easy feeling, I'd started to spend more and more time with him.

There was a little hill on the rear side of the orphanage, and Lutz had enjoyed sitting by the bases of the tall trees that grew there. He'd always make a beeline for that spot when he'd finished his assigned chores—it became my routine to tag along without asking him, and snooze above the ground on one of the branches of the big trees.

During these times, conversation with Lutz was scarce—he always read his books and I had an afternoon nap.

"Should we go home?" I'd call down to him before the sun had fully set, but he'd never once replied to my question. Probably because the orphanage had never truly been home.

Not to Lutz, and not to me.

During the winter when we'd turned ten years old, my magical abilities had become known to the priest who ran the orphanage. For a few years, I'd felt a vague sense that there was an uncontrollable power lurking inside of me. I know now that magic seems to respond to the ebbs and flows of emotions.

In my case, my magic always spiked most easily in response to anger.

On that day, the priest had summoned me. He'd told me to stay away from Lutz, although not in so many words. He'd been dismayed that I, a "good kid" who was sociable (on the surface, at least), was spending time with Lutz, the "problem child" who took no pains to fit in.

I'd grown infuriated at the priest and the spiel of platitudes he'd employed to convince me.

At the exact moment that I'd shouted, "You don't know the first thing about us!" a nearby book had erupted into flames.

Watching the priest's distressed reaction, I'd succumbed to feelings of despair and resignation.

Oh. Turns out I really am a monster, I'd thought.

I had only Lutz to thank for restoring my loose grip on sanity. Lutz had

appeared before the other children had noticed the commotion and crowded around. He'd held his hand above the book which had been burning, and it had frozen.

"I'm the same kind of monster that he is," Lutz had declared. I'll never forget the look on the priest's face upon hearing that. His eyes had looked terribly empty, like a broth of concentrated fear, despair, contempt, pity, and a host of other dark emotions.

Despite that, the priest continued to insist that Lutz and I were normal children. "You're normal kids, just more unique, but you're still dear members of my family," he'd said.

When all was normal, he'd interact with us with a smile, but if he caught a single glimpse of our magic, he'd tell us off, saying that it was evil, that magic was the devil's power. The look on the priest's face during those times had seemed far more demonic to me.

I couldn't even get mad anymore.

In truth, the priest had only been covering his eyes, frantically trying to screw on the lid and hide the odor.

He hadn't been thinking about our futures when he got angry; it hadn't been his love for us that drove him to shirk away from our magic. Here were two children in his orphanage whom he hadn't been able to fully accept, power and all, and the priest just couldn't deal with that ugly part of himself.

After that, the seasons came and went, and Lutz and I turned thirteen.

Knowledge of our existence had finally reached Nevel's authorities, and the curtain had finally closed on our misshapen family act. When the knights came to take custody of us, the priest had offered a show of resistance by arguing, but I saw the relief creeping into his facial expression. He'd continuously turned a blind eye to the cracks in our relationship, which had allowed it to deteriorate beyond the point of repair.

Even without the forcible termination of our "family" from outside sources, the end would've probably been imminent anyway.

Then, in the palace that the knights had escorted us to, we'd met the

princess, three years our junior.

Her platinum-blond hair flowed in gentle waves, so long that it dangled by her waist. Her eyes were a blue the color of the sky on a nice, clear day, and they were adorned with long eyelashes. She was at once adorable and cute, and at the same time, beautiful in a dignified way. In contrast to Lutz, I was an almost total stranger to the stories in books, but her appearance exactly matched my vague notion of what a princess should look like.

She possessed a simple-minded, innocent appearance, like every fiber of her being had been woven from only the prettiest of things. However, her looks belied her true intelligence.

On top of that, she was weird.

At first, I'd thought that she'd approached us in order to win our allegiance, on her older brother's orders. But she'd acted too ridiculously honest for that to be the case.

When asked if she was scared of us, when probed about whether she pitied us, she'd unflinchingly agreed.

Hearing such up-front replies would've disarmed anybody. I couldn't sense any deception in her words either when she'd said that she wanted to learn more about us. What choice did I have but to trust her, when she'd spoken with eyes so clear, devoid of all malice?

A princess would usually never be allowed anywhere near the likes of us, but she'd never tired of popping over for a chat. Her temper never rankled at Lutz's rejections, and bit by bit, she drew us closer to herself.

I can't say that I wasn't surprised when she brought us handmade sweets, loudly proclaiming that she was aiming to win Lutz over stomach-first. She looked like she'd never even had to wash her own plate, but the delicious taste of the sweets she'd made had even surpassed the chef's.

However much of a sourpuss I may have been, I couldn't look at all the effort she'd put into understanding us and just shrug it off as a facade. Before I knew it, my heart was filled to the brim with the warmth she'd bestowed upon me.

This is enough for me, I'd thought. I won't be so greedy as to hope that she

accepts the other part of me, the sorcerer.

And yet, despite my thinking, she'd long since accepted that part of me too. She hadn't averted her eyes like the priest—she'd acknowledged us as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and had still decided to remain by our sides.

The moment I'd understood that, the tension drained from my shoulders.

I no longer have to fear rejection. I don't need to stubbornly turn my back anymore. After all, we're her Stove and her Ice Room. Whatever airs we put on, it's all meaningless now.

When I thought about it like that, it all seemed so hilarious. I couldn't control my laughter. *This is where I want to be, I'd thought. Here. Just the princess, Lutz, and me. That's all for me. I won't ask for anything more.*

I don't care what name is given to our relationship. We don't have to be family; we don't have to be friends. Let's see, I'd even settle for master and servant.

"Teo," Lutz called my name while I was entrenched in scrolling through memories from the past. He must've found my silence odd, so he shot me a suspicious look.

"Hmm? You call me?" I answered.

"Why've you shut up all of a sudden?" he asked. "What's wrong? Got a cramp?" My eyes flew wide open.

His words sounded nonchalant and half-joking, but after a look at his facial expression, I understood that he was actually concerned. This was a reaction that I would've never dreamed of seeing from the old him.

"You've really mellowed," I muttered quietly.

"What?! Is that all I get for worrying about you? Just you making fun of me?" The corners of Lutz's eyes rose.

He's not only mellowed, but he's become a lot more expressive, I thought.

“No, it’s honestly quite moving,” I remarked.

“If you’re picking a fight, then get off that horse and let’s go for it,” Lutz declared.

“It’s all thanks to the princess,” I said.

Lutz’s white cheeks flushed. He groaned and lost his tongue, then turned his face away to obscure his beetroot cheeks.

“Whatever. Dumbass.”

“That’s me,” I replied leisurely, and he said nothing more.

From then on, we rode our way to Nevel’s capital without exchanging conversation. We squeezed in a few breaks and naps along the way.

When we finally arrived at the palace, we were both already dead tired. Willpower alone was just barely keeping us on our feet.

Our unsteady steps didn’t take us first to our bedroom, but rather to our familiar retreat—the greenhouse.

What am I even doing? I thought, astonished by my own actions. There was no guarantee that she’d even be there.

But I wanted to see her. And there, I felt that I just might.

I opened the door to the greenhouse.

A petite figure was visible beyond the green leaves. Her lustrous platinum-blond hair poked above the foliage. Her back was facing us, so she hadn’t yet noticed our presence. By her side, her personal guard reacted immediately, letting out an unamused snort.

That guard really knows how to get on someone’s nerves.

“Princess,” I called softly. My voice sounded horrible, hoarser than I’d ever thought that it could be. I feared that she wouldn’t hear me, but her shoulders flinched in reaction, responding to my voice.

“Princess.” Lutz called out this time, as if to rival me. His voice was strained as well, and hard to hear. Even so, the princess spun around.

Her clear, sky-blue eyes found us, and shot wide open.

Mind that they don't fall out, I thought absentmindedly.

Her lips quivered, and slowly she mouthed our names, though no sound came out. She stumbled one step forward. Her personal guard reached out to support her, but she waved his arm away, dismissing him, and took another step.

Then, the voice we'd eagerly awaited called out to us.

"Lutz," she said.

"What?" Lutz responded bluntly, probably a little embarrassed.

"Teo."

"Yes, Princess?" I answered with a full-faced smile, letting my joy show in full.

She fell into a stunned silence, and tears began to well up in her eyes. The princess opened her mouth, and in place of words came a sound like air escaping. Then she scrunched up her face.

"Teo, Lutz," she called our names again, and tears trickled down her cheeks, on and on, like an endless stream of translucent jewels. The princess didn't try to hide her teary face, and began to wail.

"Wel—Welcome home..." she managed to articulate, while sobbing like a child.

What I experienced at that moment was euphoria. An almost agonizing joy overran my heart, and I felt overwhelming relief—I'd finally found what I had been longing for. The sense of satisfaction bordered on pain.

Even though I wasn't sad, for some reason, the urge to weep struck me.

If I told her that the quivering in my lips beneath my smile was just me copying her lead, I wonder if she'd believe me. After all, tears of joy don't do anything for the image I'm going for.

"I'm home," I said.

I've finally found it. A place to come home to.

Apology from the Princess

The sorcerer abduction plot orchestrated by the Kingdom of Skelluts had ultimately ended in failure for the War-Hungry King; Nevel had uncovered the plan before it'd been fully enacted. By coordinating with the allied Kingdom of Vint, Nevel had succeeded in luring the group of conspirators—as well as one of the Skellutian king's personal units—into a trap.

Although Vint had no direct stake in this matter, their authorities had probably deemed the warmongering Kingdom of Skelluts to be a problem too grave to overlook, since enemy forces had sought to bolster Skelluts's military might with two new sorcerers. Vint had already been the victim of countless border skirmishes with Skelluts, so they couldn't afford to act disinterested; if Skelluts was going to bare its fangs at somebody, then that somebody would be one of its four neighbors.

With their interests aligned, Nevel and Vint announced a joint declaration of war on Skelluts, using the abduction incident as their *casus belli*.

The Kingdom of Schner and the small Kingdom of Balt, which were countries to Skelluts's north, and the Kingdom of Flanmer, to Skelluts's south, pledged their support to the forces of the Nevel-Vint alliance. Since its western flank was all ocean, Skelluts found itself in the position of having enemies on essentially all sides.

The difference in numbers was simply too great, even for such a military-focused culture as Skelluts—on every battlefield, the War-Hungry King's forces would be outmanned. Moreover, Nevel and Flanmer were colossal countries with twice as much territory as Skelluts. Whatever struggle Skelluts might attempt, its army didn't stand a chance.

The War-Hungry King, however, failed to properly recognize his country's hopeless circumstances. His advisers counseled surrender, but he refused. And so, this foolish king plunged the land into the flames of a great war...

Or so it seemed.

There was a coup d'état, a regicide perpetrated by an order of Skellutian

knights. Skelluts issued their surrender on the same day. The conflict which had engulfed half of the continent quickly fizzled out.

Although Nevel had managed to avoid a large-scale conflict, turmoil still lingered within its borders.

Nicholas had been imprisoned. His punishment would likely be carried out after the culmination of the investigation. Hilde would probably also receive some sort of punishment, of course, but not one as severe as Nicholas's because of her extenuating circumstances.

I, Rosemary von Velfalt, had no influence over state politics. All I could do was hole up in the palace under constant guard, and wait for the situation to blow over.

Since the day of Lutz and Teo's abduction, roughly half a year had passed. I was currently preparing some tea in the rest area adjoining the greenhouse.

Out of the blue, Chris stopped by.

"It's been too long, Rose," he greeted me.

The greenhouse was located right on the edge of the castle, so Chris couldn't just pop in here while passing by on other business—in fact, this was the first time that he'd ever set foot in this place.

Is there something urgent that he needs me for?

"Is there something that you need from me?" I repeated my question out loud nervously.

"Do I need to have a reason to drop in to see you?" he responded with a bitter smile.

"Umm... N-No, I didn't mean that," I stammered. I was caught off guard by his answer. I struggled to hide my confusion at his casual demeanor because I'd braced myself to prepare for an emergency.

"I've had more than my fill of staring at the faces of crusty old men," Chris joked. "Who better than my cute little sister to wash that image out?"

That had probably been meant as a jest to lighten the mood in the room, but he'd said it with a straight face. His deadpan expression made it quite hard to

know how to react.

“R-Right,” I said, not sure what else to say.

Sir Leonhart, who’d accompanied Chris as his guard, adopted a slightly strained smile. I froze when our gazes met, then I reflexively looked away and went pale.

I hadn’t seen him face-to-face since the day that Hilde had been attacked. I felt uncomfortable; it wasn’t like we’d had an argument, but our parting had taken place on a weird note. I wasn’t sure how to act in front of him now.

But Rose, listen up! Refusing to look at him isn’t doing you any favors.

I raised my face up, but the motion was unnaturally slow, as I was afraid to see Sir Leonhart’s reaction. When I took a nervous peek, he greeted me with eyes that looked slightly troubled. He then turned his gaze away.

The mature way that he’d treated me caused my cheeks to burn.

Where did I get the crazy idea that I’d possibly offended him? Sir Leonhart might’ve taken up a huge space in my mind, but the reverse wasn’t true.

To him, I’m just a little princess. Nothing more, nothing less.

I was embarrassed to have even entertained the delusion that I’d done anything to grieve his heart.

“Rose?” Chris asked, perplexed. “Is something the matter?”

“N-No, it’s nothing,” I replied with a hurried shake of my head, then changed the subject. “Chris, since you’ve come all the way here, would you care for some tea?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I assured him. “Miss Irene called for Lutz and Teo, and so I don’t think they’ll be returning for a while. I’d love your company—having tea by myself feels lonely.”

“Right then.” There was a faint, happy twinge in Chris’s eyes. He sat down on a chair gracefully.

“We’ve just finished making something interesting,” I told him, “so if you

don't mind, would you like to try it?"

"Something interesting?" he wondered.

"That's right." I reached for the box that I'd set down by my side, and opened the lid. A white porcelain bowl sat atop a layer of ice. Inside was something white and solid. I collected some in a large spoon, and dished the scoop into a small, shallow glass dish.

I handed the bowl to Chris, and he examined it, confused.

"What...is it?" he asked.

"A frozen dessert," I stated simply.

"Frozen dessert... This?" Chris's eyes widened a bit, and he stared up and down at the bowl in his hand.

His surprise was understandable. Baked confections, like madeleines and cookies, were the standard in Nevel. While there were a few frozen desserts here, they were essentially just sorbets—fruit juice frozen in the ice room. This was probably his first glimpse of a white, creamy dessert.

"I enlisted Lutz's help in making it," I explained. "We mixed milk, eggs, and sugar, then froze the mixture to harden it."

That's right. Truth be told, this is vanilla ice cream. Although, since I couldn't wrangle any vanilla beans, maybe I should say it's milk ice cream to be accurate.

Until a few minutes ago, Lutz, Teo, and I had taken up residence in the kitchen. We'd been working hard at making candy—or rather, at sorcery training. Miss Irene had granted us permission, so I'd gathered the ingredients.

I'd gone into the endeavor expecting it to be a piece of cake, but the task had proved to be quite the challenge. Apparently, controlling magic at such a precise level was incredibly difficult. On one attempt, we'd cooled the ice cream too much and it'd gone rock solid; on another, the moisture in the air had gotten inside the mixture and made it crunchy when frozen.

Although Teo had smaller magical reserves than Lutz, fine control was one of his stronger skills, so Teo's success had come early.

I seem to remember Lutz muttering to himself in frustration after having seen

the nice cooked-brown look of Teo's baked sweets. I think his desire to not lose to Teo energized him, so his rate of improvement definitely picked up quite a lot of speed after that.

Those two really do make a great team.

"They made sweets? With magic?" Chris asked, staring at me with a look of amazement.

"Yes." I nodded and began to break out in a cold sweat. *Did I screw up somehow?*

"And you're the one who came up with this method?"

"I am," I said. "I brought the suggestion to Miss Irene, thinking that it might aid in teaching them to control their powers."

Maybe my idea to use magic to make sweets was a bit too crazy after all? It'd sent Lutz and Teo into fits of laughter, and Miss Irene had let out a surprised chuckle. Now, seeing Chris's reaction on top of the others, I had to recognize that my plan was possibly outlandish.

"Shouldn't I have?" I asked timidly.

Chris squinted, amused, and shook his head. "No. It's very *you*." I'd grown flustered, but Chris continued to smile at me. "If every ruler was more like you, I'm sure that the world would be a safer place."

Uhh, what's that supposed to mean?

I struggled to work out whether that had been a compliment or just exasperation. Judging from his facial expression alone, assuming that his remark had been a compliment might've been too optimistic. The look in his eyes was so warm that it seemed like pity.

Chris left me to sit in silence with a funny look on my face, and he scooped up some of the ice cream.

The slight frozen firmness that had been present when I'd dished the ice cream into his bowl had melted slightly while we'd been talking, giving way to just the right consistency for eating. The ice cream had begun to gloop on top of his silver spoon. The sight looked scrumptious to me, but I already knew the

taste. To Chris, it might've seemed unsettling.

Maybe I shouldn't be feeding Nevel's next king mystery foods.

"Chris, if you don't think you can... Ah!"

The moment that I reached out my hand to stop him, Chris placed the spoon into his mouth.

You could've saved the chivalry for some other time!

As soon as the dessert entered his mouth, Chris went still. Then, with his face downcast, he chewed. The ice cream had probably melted in an instant, so there was nothing for him to actually bite down on. I kept watching in suspense until he swallowed.

"Was it not to your liking?" I asked in concern.

"No, it was delicious." Chris scooped another spoonful into his mouth.

I saw an almost imperceptible relaxation in his eyes, and felt relieved. The fact that his default expression was blank made spotting these small changes a little easier. Judging from the delighted softening of his features, I felt that he probably wasn't just being polite.

"This is nothing like any frozen dessert I've ever eaten before," he remarked. "It's very sweet, but not overpowering, and it's rich. The texture's smooth too—it feels pleasant on the tongue." Chris praised the ice cream at length, which was an unusual occurrence.

I really am glad that he likes it.

"And to have made this with magic is the biggest surprise," he praised. "It's brilliant."

Chris's compliment left me feeling strangely happy, even though the accomplishment wasn't mine.

I just have to tell them both. They'll be over the moon, I know it. The thought brought a smile to my cheeks.

"Yes. Lutz and Teo have truly wonderful powers." I answered Chris with a relaxed expression, and for some reason, he returned an odd look.

“You said that you came up with the method?” he asked.

“Hmm? I did.”

“And you’re the one who made this dessert?”

“I made it with Lutz. Why do you ask?” I questioned him, tilting my face.

Chris shook his head. “Nothing. I was just struck by the thought that my little sister is a stranger to greed.”

Chris laughed loudly, and I wasn’t sure how to react.

I see myself as quite the greedy person though. For starters, even this ice cream is something I suggested to everyone just to satisfy my own cravings.

“Will you try some too, Leonhart?” Chris asked.

I was so busy trying to figure out a response that I lost my chance to argue.

Chris had brought the conversation to Sir Leonhart, who was stationed behind him as his guard. But Sir Leonhart put on a strained smile and declined. “I’m on duty, I’m afraid.”

Though a little disappointed, my opinion of him didn’t worsen. It improved, if anything. His reason to refuse was exceedingly exemplary.

I can’t be the only one who has a thing for men that are devoted to their work.

After we’d whiled away some time with idle conversation, Chris stood up from his chair.

“I’d better get back to work. Sorry for keeping you so long.”

“Please,” I said as I accompanied him to the door to see him out. “I haven’t been able to talk with you in so long—it brightened my day.”

Chris winked with one of his almond eyes. “Order will return to Nevel soon enough. When it does, I’ll come and see you until you’re sick of my face.” Chris had told another joke, just to cheer me up.

Yeah, but I know you’re up to your eyeballs in work, I muttered internally. There were faint bags under his eyes, and he’d lost a bit of weight.

If you have the time to come and see me, you should use it to rest, I wanted to say, but kept the thought to myself.

For one, I didn't want to shut out my awkward brother's expression of love. More simply, it made me happy to see him.

"I'll be waiting," I replied, and left it at that. Chris's face mellowed happily.

Sir Leonhart followed Chris in giving his farewells. "Well then, Princess, I'll take my leave."

"Ah..." a quiet murmur trickled from my lips.

I don't want to part from him like this without clearing up the awkward atmosphere.

I might've been the only one to think that the situation was awkward, but I wanted to apologize for the many ways I'd acted rudely.

And yet, the words to hold him back got stuck in my throat.

I'd learned how important his duties were to him only a few minutes prior, so I hesitated to keep him any longer for personal business. However, Sir Leonhart was as busy as Chris, and if I let him slip past me today, I wasn't sure when I'd next find a chance to see him.

But I didn't want to interrupt his work either.

The clock ticked while I dwelt on the dilemma, and the time limit drew imminent.

"Princess? Are you feeling all right?" Sir Leonhart inquired with concern as I hung my head. When I looked up, his manly good looks were clouded with worry.

He was as kind as ever, despite my unpleasant attitude.

How could I cause him any more trouble?

"I'm...fine. Do come by again." I clenched the hand that I'd been about to reach out with, and instead shook my head. Lacking courage, I tried to act like the good girl and send him off.

But Chris, seeing me act unusual, began to talk after a slight contemplation.

“Rose.”

“Yes?” I replied.

“Do you mind if I borrow Klaus for a minute?” Chris asked.

“Huh?”

My eyes shot wide-open in astonishment and I found myself at a loss for words.

What could Chris possibly want from Klaus?

Baffled, I looked around, and saw that I wasn’t the only one who’d been shocked. Klaus, the man in question, had frozen, and Sir Leonhart was visibly confused.

“But then, who will guard the princess?” Sir Leonhart asked.

“I only want to have a little chat,” explained Chris. “I’ll send him back once we reach my office. I want you to stay with Rose until then.”

“As you will.” Sir Leonhart’s hesitation lasted only for a moment. His reserved expression returned immediately and he nodded.

On the other end of the scale, I was freaking out.

“Does that suit you, Rose?” Chris stared into my eyes as he asked. There was a very kind look in his gaze for some reason.

It could be that Chris suggested this for my sake, I realized at last.

“It does.” I bowed my head to convey my thanks.

Chris then made his exit, taking the reluctant Klaus with him.

Inside the suddenly silent room, I stood deathly still, not saying anything.

Uh-oh, what should I do now? My nerves are on edge. I can’t even look straight at him.

Still facing down, I bit into my lips. Sweat steadily started to drench my clenched hands.

There were too many things that I wanted to apologize for, but I wasn’t sure where to begin.

First, there was the blatant way that I'd looked away from him earlier, and second, the way that I'd taken my emotions out on him during Hilde's incident. There might've also been other instances of impoliteness as well that I hadn't thought of. I figured that I ought to apologize for everything at once, but the words just wouldn't come out.

Sir Leonhart was the first to break the silence.

"Princess."

"Y-Yes?" I responded. My voice squeaked because he'd caught me unprepared.

My face blushed in embarrassment, but Sir Leonhart didn't appear to be bothered by that. He looked at me, his expression serious.

"I shouldn't say this so soon after insisting that I'm on duty," he began, "but could I talk to you about something briefly?"

"Of course," I responded. "What about?"

I hadn't expected for Sir Leonhart to be the one to start the conversation.

Anxiety had dried out the inside of my mouth. My heart was throbbing so hard that I could hear it. No matter what positive spin I tried to put on it, all I was left with was a sense of dread.

Although this situation was of my own creation, my body was paralyzed by the thought that he might hate me.

Even if he doesn't say so explicitly, if he lets disappointment or hatred cloud his eyes or his attitude, then I don't think there'll be any way for me to recover.

That's what I'd thought, but what happened next blew away my pessimistic internal monologue. Sir Leonhart abruptly bowed his head.

"You have my humblest apologies."

"Huh?!" I gasped.

The sheer shock of it rendered me speechless. I stood in frozen silence, staring at the whorl of his hair, which was visible even from my height since he was bowing so low.

Why? For what reason? The question monopolized my mind, but no words left my lips. My mouth jammed to a halt, a half-open gape.

Still in his bowing posture, Sir Leonhart continued, "I've wanted to apologize to you once more for so long, but I haven't found myself in the same room as you—it's taken more time than it should've."

"Please, don't!" I blurted out, nearly screaming.

I should be the one saying sorry, not Sir Leonhart.

"Raise your head, please!" I told him, still flustered. "There's nothing for you to apologize for, Sir Orsein."

He might've noticed that I was on the verge of tears, because he did what I'd asked and raised his head. Our eyes met, and a look of bewilderment formed on his features.

I don't even have to guess how awful my face must look right now.

I exhaled a deep sigh in order to release the pressure valve on my excited emotions. I stood up straight, tensing my stomach to prevent my voice from faltering.

"I'm the one who ought to apologize," I said. My tone was soft and quiet.

Sir Leonhart's almond eyes opened wide.

"Half a year ago, I took matters into my own hands, of my own initiative, without consulting anyone. As a result, I caused a great deal of trouble for everyone in the royal guard. Really, I ought to have consulted with you or Klaus as soon as I sensed something abnormal."

Sir Leonhart had asked me countless times to rely on him. And yet, I'd ignored his outstretched hand, and instead charged on by myself.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I was conceited, thinking that I might actually be able to affect something."

"Princess." Sir Leonhart called out to me just as I was about to hang my head. I was ashamed and full of regret.

I lifted my gaze, and saw my reflection in his sincere eyes. He lowered his

eyebrows sadly, and slowly shook his head.

“Please,” he implored, “don’t speak so ill of yourself.”

“But...”

“Your decision wasn’t wrong. If you had done nothing, we wouldn’t have been able to save Hilde Kremer. I’m the one who deserves the blame. You were hurting, and instead of caring for you, I just told you to bear with it.” He said this openly, his tone thick with remorse. “I should never have done that, and I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t say anything.

When Hilde had been attacked, I’d lost my composure. I should have been grateful to him. His instructions to me that I should bear the circumstances—these had allowed me to calm down, and I had no intention of blaming him for that.

Those were my honest thoughts. But maybe, just maybe, there was something that gnawed at my heart.

I must have been hurt, at least to the extent that I couldn’t immediately deny his words. Regardless of my own imperfection, I’d thought that him leaving me alone to deal with the situation was wrong.

“To be honest,” Sir Leonhart continued, “I was slightly frustrated that you didn’t rely on Klaus or on me. And I do sometimes wonder irritatedly why you press on by yourself so stubbornly. But at some point, I realized something: perhaps it’s not that you *won’t* rely on us—it’s that you *can’t*.”

“Huh...” I blinked in astonishment at Sir Leonhart’s words. A moment later, my eyes grew wide.

I must’ve misheard, I thought, wondering if my ears might be playing tricks on me. Had my hopes manifested in a hallucination? But Sir Leonhart knelt down and scooped up my hand in a respectful gesture, proving that there had been no misunderstanding.

My heart fluttered at the sight of his unclouded black pupils, which pierced me from where he knelt below my eyeline.

“A while ago, I told you that I wished you’d lean more on those around you. Do you remember?” he asked quietly.

I nodded over and over, my lips still tightly pursed. I desperately blockaded the tears that threatened to fall as my head bounced—his eyes relaxed, and a faint smile rose to his lips.

But the smile vanished at once, giving way to a stern expression, and he continued: “Back then, I suspected that your duties and responsibilities as a member of the royal family forbade you from relying on others. But that couldn’t have been the whole story. You always looked so distressed.”

“Sir...Orsein...” my voice grew horribly hoarse as I called out to him.

I can’t believe it! He’d actually noticed. I was just a charmless woman who’d paid no heed to his advice, but he’d certainly paid attention to me. He’d kept me in his thoughts.

The mental image of him extending his hand for me to take, regardless of whether I’d accept it, overwhelmed me with emotion.

“When I watched the way that you’d hang your head, I didn’t perceive you as just a girl acting stubborn; it was as though you had something you wished to say. Somebody overcome with arrogance and self-importance surely would never make such a face.”

Sir Leonhart paused and looked deep into my eyes. Reflected in his pupils, I looked horribly wretched; I was a jumbled mix of fear and relief, like a child who’d finally found her home after wandering around lost.

His firm palm slowly blanketed my hand. “Are you shouldering some great burden by yourself?”

I couldn’t respond at once. Deep down, I knew that I should deny it without delay. *What are you talking about?* I should ask, then smile like I was clueless, and let it pass.

But my hands, clutched inside his, were shaking. My voice stuck in my throat. All my concentration was devoted to fighting back the tears—I didn’t have any spare energy to voice a denial.

This worry had always plagued me: I didn't know whether the path I was treading was the right one. My only guiding lights were my memories, which had faded as the months went by.

I'd wanted to ask for help, but there had been nobody that I could talk to. All that I could do was self-soothe and tell myself that everything was fine. Even clasping the hand of the man that I loved, who'd told me to rely on him, had seemed like just another obstacle, another flag.

I was ensnared by the obsessional idea that I had to solve everything by myself.

But now, I sort of get it—I hadn't been shielding everyone, or trying to protect them. I'd just been turning my back to them, refusing to take their hands, like a helpless child with no grasp on how little my abilities were worth.

Even so, Sir Leonhart had watched over me. He'd kept me in his mind. Regardless of the fact that I was a charmless kid who'd swatted his kind hand away, he'd still reached out, again and again, asking me to rely on him.

"If you don't wish to tell me, then I won't wrest it from you," he said kindly. "But, if you feel that carrying your burden is causing you grief, then share it with me. I want you to let me protect the things that you wish to keep safe."

I was speechless. My chest felt so tight that it hurt.

Driven by a thoughtless urge, I wrapped my arms around Sir Leonhart, who was still kneeling.

"Sir Leon!"



He gasped for a moment, surprised, but didn't try to peel me away.

At last, his large hand slowly stroked my back. The action was gentle, as though he were handling something broken, and I knew that he wanted to make sure that he didn't scare me.

I felt the warmth where he touched me, and it sent tremors through my heart. The feelings that overflowed inside me possessed a scorching heat that could no longer be written off as idolization or misunderstanding.

Oh, I love him. I love him so much it's crazy.

But it wasn't infatuation with the character from *Hidden World*, the royal guard captain.

No, I'd fallen in love with this person, Sir Leonhart von Orsein, all over again.

(Continued in the next volume)

Side Story: The Reincarnated Princess and Her Sweets

I was currently in the laboratory of Miss Irene von Altman, the sorcery teacher. This space was within a room in the tower on the southwestern side of the palace.

Atop the marble table was laboratory equipment—well, actually, cooking utensils. The ingredients were placed to the side of the utensils: milk in a glass pitcher, sugar, chicken eggs, and a separate pile of cake flour, butter, and nuts.

Lutz bore a stiff smile as he cast his suspicious gaze across the ingredients.

“You were being serious...” he murmured, his voice feeble.

“Of course I was.” I puffed out my chest with a hand on my hip and answered proudly.

I couldn’t care less that I was the only one excited. I was raring to go! I’d even swapped out my usual dress, afraid to get it dirty, for a simple aqua-blue one-piece and a white apron. Miss Irene had gladly provided me with clothes and somewhere to change when I’d asked her. I’d also braided my hair and tied it up in a bun.

I don’t think anybody’ll be mistaking me for a princess today.

Right, let’s get started, I thought, and rolled up my sleeves.

First comes the measuring.

As I pulled the scales over and removed the lid to the sugar pot, I felt Lutz staring at me from behind. I turned around, expecting him to help out, but he was watching me with a sullen look on his face.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“I’ll give in and say that I’m fine with Teo and me making sweets by ourselves. And we’ll make this ice cream or whatever it is that you want to eat. Honestly though, I don’t see why you need to sit in.”

“You two don’t know the method,” I asserted.

“We could do it if you told us how,” Lutz rebutted.

I raised one eyebrow high at his inexplicably frantic attempts to boot me out.

Oh, you could do it, could you? Let’s fix that misunderstanding.

“Making sweets is *hard*.” I looked at Lutz, my eyes ice-cold. “It requires a careful touch, as well as performing accurate measurements. You might look delicate on the outside, but internally, you’re all over the place. I can’t imagine you following all the steps in the right order.”

“I, uhh...can do it. I think,” said Lutz, sounding less assured than he had a moment ago.

“Yeah, very persuasive.” *If you want me to believe you, then look me in the eye and speak with more confidence.*

I let out a single sigh.

“Why don’t you want me here, anyway?” I asked Lutz, casting my eyes down sadly and dropping the corners of my eyebrows. “Am I in your way?”

“Of course not!” Lutz denied at once. A little bit of anger laced his tone.

Phew. If he’d hesitated or stumbled over his words, I’d be feeling pretty lousy right about now.

“So, that’s settled then?” I ditched the sulky attitude and replaced it with my sweetest smile.

Sorry Lutz, but I sealed the deal while you were still floundering.

Lutz’s head slumped.

Teo placed his hand on Lutz’s shoulder and let out a dry chuckle. “Give up, Lutz. We’ll never be able to beat her in an argument.”

“You have a point.”

They put on resigned smiles and consoled each other.

Hey, could you cut that out? You two are acting like I’m some sort of villain.

“You’re making me sound awful.” I puffed out my cheeks and glared at Teo.

Raising his hands as though surrendering, he walked up beside me. He scanned the line of ingredients with interest. “Princess, are we going to use all of these for the frozen dessert?”

“Not all of them,” I clarified. “I’ve collected the ingredients for some baked confectioneries too. I thought I’d have you help as well.”

“Gotcha. What should I do for now?” Teo rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. The robe that he usually wore was folded up in the corner, out of the way.

“Okay, first, sieve the flour.” I handed him the fine mesh sieve and the cake flour I’d measured earlier.

He hadn’t used one before, so I gave him a simple explanation on how to separate clumps from the flour and dust it through the sieve. Teo came to grips with that task without any problems, so I figured that he could handle the next one too—I handed him some sugar and the butter that I’d left out at room temperature to soften.

“What about me?” Lutz asked with an intense gaze from my other side.

“Let’s see.” I paused for a little while, then asked him to do some measuring. “Could I get you to pour out the milk?” I added one stipulation to my request: “It has to be an exact measurement.”

“Got it.” Lutz took the milk from me, looking serious, then knelt down to align his eyeline with the rim of the measuring cup. I couldn’t help but grin at how wonderfully childish he looked while carefully pouring the milk with trembling hands.

Teo, on the other hand, was steadily progressing on his tasks. With an experienced touch, he mixed the ingredients that he’d transferred to the bowl.

“You seem well practiced,” I found myself whispering in admiration.

Teo fumbled, embarrassed. “I was at the orphanage longer than most, so I’ve gotten quite used to housework.”

Upon hearing him say that, the penny dropped.

“I never knew.”

He does manage everything with finesse, and he’s great at looking after

people. I'll bet he made an excellent older brother at the orphanage.

"Although, the priest and the older girls generally did the cooking—I only helped out," he explained. "But the little 'uns would sometimes come crying to me that they were hungry, so I'd whip up some bread for them." He narrowed his eyes fondly, as if reliving a gentle memory.

I watched his face from the side as he spoke about his childhood. His hands were still at work the whole time, and I was struck by how kind he looked. The relaxed atmosphere that he exuded, so uncharacteristic of other boys his age, enchanted me.

"I think you'll make a fine husband, Teo." I whispered my opinion in a quiet tone, and then, all of a sudden, I heard a loud crashing noise from beside me.

My eyes instinctively sought out the source of the disturbance. It seemed that Lutz had dropped the pitcher onto the table. Fortunately, it hadn't broken, and the milk hadn't spilled.

"Lutz, what happened?" I asked. "Are you all right?" I saw when I gazed at Lutz that he'd frozen in the stance where he'd dropped the pitcher.

"Wh-Wh-What did you just say...?" Lutz stuttered and stammered, his mouth flinging open, shut, and open again. For some reason, he'd blanched. "What do you mean, 'husband'?!"

"Huh?" I asked, bewildered.

Sorry Lutz. I can see that you're trying desperately to tell me something, but I don't have a clue what you're trying to communicate.

I tilted my head, and my expression was puzzled.

"Just now—you said that Teo would make a fine husband!"

"Uhh, yes. I did. Is something odd?" I asked him, doubt showing on my face. Lutz's complexion grew even more dire.

What in the world is the matter?

"God, Lutz," Teo said. "Desperate much?"

Upon hearing Teo's half-stifled voice, I turned around. He was hunched over,

both hands clutching the edge of the table. His shoulders were shaking.

He's probably—no, definitely—laughing.

Affirming my suspicion, Lutz exclaimed, "Don't laugh!"

"No can do. It's just too funny," Teo declared, raising his face back up and sporting a full smile. He wiped the corner of his eye with the back of his index finger to remove the faint traces of tears. "Like, the princess didn't mean anything by it! And you're getting all worked up by yourself."

"Huh?" Lutz froze, looking a bit silly with his mouth half open. He remained still for several seconds like that, then rotated his head around spasmodically, like a robot that had run out of oil.

"...There wasn't any deep meaning in what you said just then?" he asked, still looking flabbergasted.

"Yes, that's right." I nodded without hesitation. "I was speaking in general."

I'd just been trying to say that kindhearted men who take care of other people (and who help out with the housework) rank pretty high on the husband scoreboard.

"R-Right," Lutz said, heaving a heavy sigh.

"Your behavior's been strange for a while now," I remarked. "What's wrong?"

First he went white, then he went red—just when I thought he'd gotten angry, he's now smiling softly at me.

It was clear that Lutz was acting strange, and I began to feel concerned. However, he just shook his head from side to side.

"It's nothing," he remarked. "More importantly, the measuring's all done. What should I do next?"

I wasn't convinced with his dismissal, but it seemed that he didn't want me to probe.

I guess I'll drop this topic.

"Okay, then—time to beat these eggs," I instructed. I pepped myself up, then took the milk from Lutz. In its place, I handed him a bowl filled with whole eggs.

While Lutz carefully whisked the eggs, I transferred the milk and the sugar to a pan.

“Princess, I’m done with mine.” Teo showed me his bowl. Inside, the mixture had become a single lump of dough.

“Thanks,” I said, switching gears. “Right then, we can let that rest for a minute. Can you give me a hand over here?”

I covered Teo’s bowl with a dampened dishcloth. Then, I mixed Lutz’s beaten eggs with the milk in the pan, and picked up a wooden spatula.

“Can do, Princess. What’s the new task?” Teo washed his hands in the bucket filled with water, wiped them with a towel, and then walked over to my side.

Now for the main event.

“Teo, I’d like you to heat this pan with a low flame,” I instructed.

Through this request, I conveyed the inference that it was time for their magic to debut. Both of their faces clearly grew stiff.

Ah, I thought this might be it, I muttered internally, after watching the color drain from their faces. The reason they wanted me to sit out while they made the sweets was to keep me from seeing them use magic.

I think they trust me, but they’re probably not ready for that level of faith yet. It makes sense—each time they’ve used their magic, they’ve been met with fear from onlookers.

Trauma doesn’t just vanish like that so easily.

“You don’t want to, do you?” I said. I looked at the two of them and coerced a smile from my lips. It might sound odd after forcing them to start this project, but I had no intention of making them perform magic against their wills.

If the two of them were adamant about not wanting me to encroach, then I planned to back down.

However, Teo shook his head after a little while of staring at my face. “It’s all right.”

The smile he dragged out looked a bit awkward. But nonetheless, he gripped

the choker with his hands, like he'd resolved himself. The clasp was released with an audible click.

"I'm not sure how hot the flame needs to be," he said warily, "so let me know."

He laid his choker on the end of the table, out of the way. Teo picked up the thin sheet of paper that we'd used while measuring the sugar, and turned to face me.

He blinked once, slowly.

I watched intently, and couldn't help but gasp.

When he reopened his eyes, the color had changed—it looked like honey had been dissolved into his gaze. I couldn't conceal my surprise at his bright irises, which reflected light like a cat's eyes peering in the darkness.

I was aware of this phenomenon. At least, I'd heard of it before. But I wasn't prepared to see the color change so vividly.

I watched in stunned silence. Before me, Teo pinched the corners of the paper and brought his hands together. He looked down, perhaps to concentrate and draw on the well of his power. Unfortunately, this caused his pretty, golden eyes to leave my view, which I thought was a little disappointing.

Teo's eyelids flickered, and as if on cue, the paper he'd pinched between his fingers instantaneously burst into flames.

He spread his hands apart. The burning paper crumbled and fell to the floor as black ash. But the fuel wasn't gone.

Pale flames danced above Teo's palms, fluttering like a mysterious creature. I was entranced by the bright, flickering flames of the small, shining fire, so much that I forgot to breathe.

"...Princess?" Teo called out to me, hesitantly.

I snapped out of my trance. When I looked up, I found that Teo's troubled features were much closer than I'd expected. He must've sidled closer without me noticing.

I hurried a few steps back and apologized.

“S-Sorry!” I squeaked.

My cheeks were hot, but that wasn’t due to the lingering heat of the fire. It was my shame—I’d been staring in a way that bordered on sexual harassment. Half of me was intensely curious to see magic for the first time. But, more than that— “I was mesmerized,” I admitted. “It was so pretty.”

When I revealed my honest feelings, Teo opened his eyes wide.

“*Pretty?*” Teo muttered, his voice hoarse, which was unusual given his regularly cheerful disposition.

What did I do to surprise him so much? I tilted my head with that doubt in my mind.

“Yes,” I answered. “It was very pretty. Also, your fire is kind of cute, like a little creature.”

It wasn’t just Teo now. Even Lutz was frozen to the spot, utterly stunned.

“*Cute,*” Lutz repeated.

What’s the matter with the both of them? I wondered, perplexed, and then I hit on a possibility.

Ah! I think I...offended them? Have I wounded their pride as sorcerers?

But it was too late for me to worry about that. I couldn’t recant the words I’d let slip.

“So it’s pretty and cute.” Teo let out a deep breath and slumped his shoulders. His imposing eyebrows furrowed, and his lips formed an arch. His face contorted as though he were about to cry and laugh at the same time.

“That’s the first time anyone’s ever said that to me.”

“Teo...” I started nervously, considering it best to apologize. But Teo grinned wider and shook his head, as though he’d seen the thought process whirring inside of my mind.

“Don’t apologize,” Teo said. “I was happy to hear you say that.”

Lutz smiled as well and nodded, expressing his agreement with Teo. “Just goes to show—we were dumb for expecting anything else from you, Princess,”

Lutz said.

Is that a compliment, or a jab at me?

Unsure of the right response, I fell silent. My face held a weird expression.

But after a short amount of time watching Teo, who was having fun manipulating the fire, and Lutz, cheerfully removing his choker, I stopped caring about whether it'd been a compliment.

"Princess," Teo said. "Let's get started."

"Okay," I answered.

I'm sure that there's more to magic than being cute or pretty. And my reaction was probably naive and silly to them.

But I couldn't give a damn about that right now.

As long as the two of them were smiling, "pretty and cute" seemed like the right answer.

Character Design



Rosemary
von Velfalt

©Rosemary

age 10

back
view





@styles of
bangs



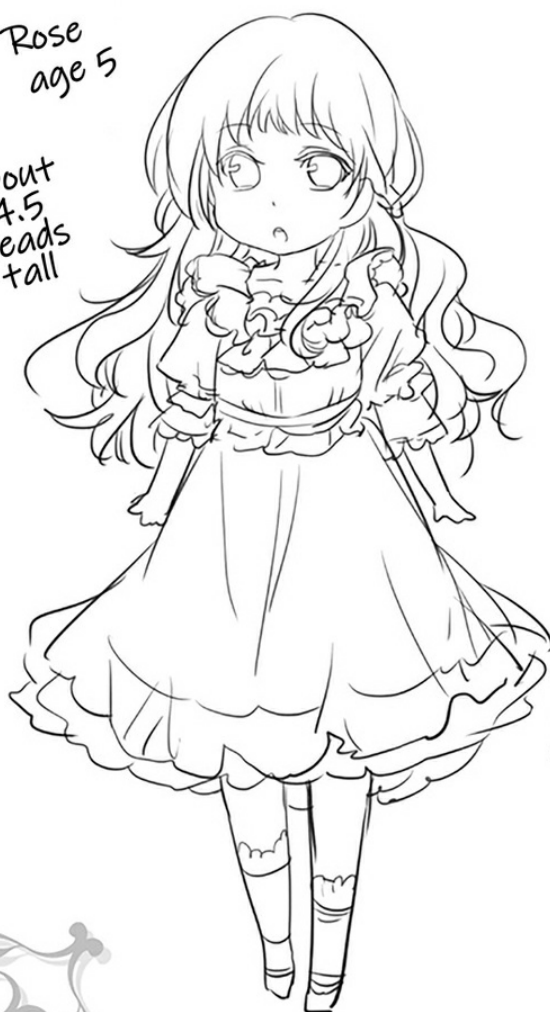
side-part



middle-part

Rose
age 5

about
4.5
heads
tall



@full body

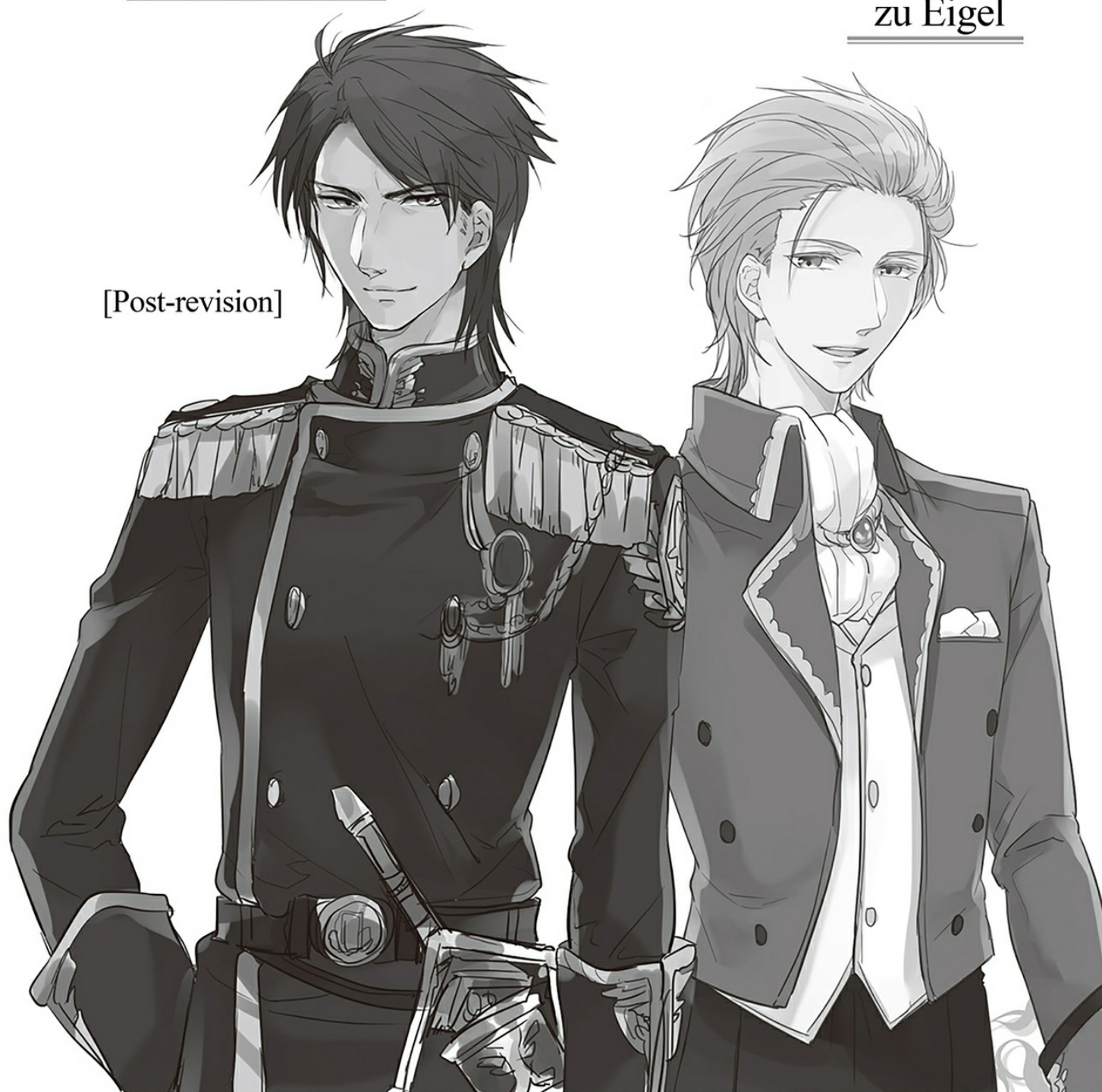
about 5
heads
tall



Leonhart
von Orsein

Julius
zu Eigel

[Post-revision]





@Height
comparison

Leonhart
189cm
About 9
heads
tall

Klaus
180 cm
About 8
heads
tall

About
10.5 heads
tall
Might
be over
190cm...

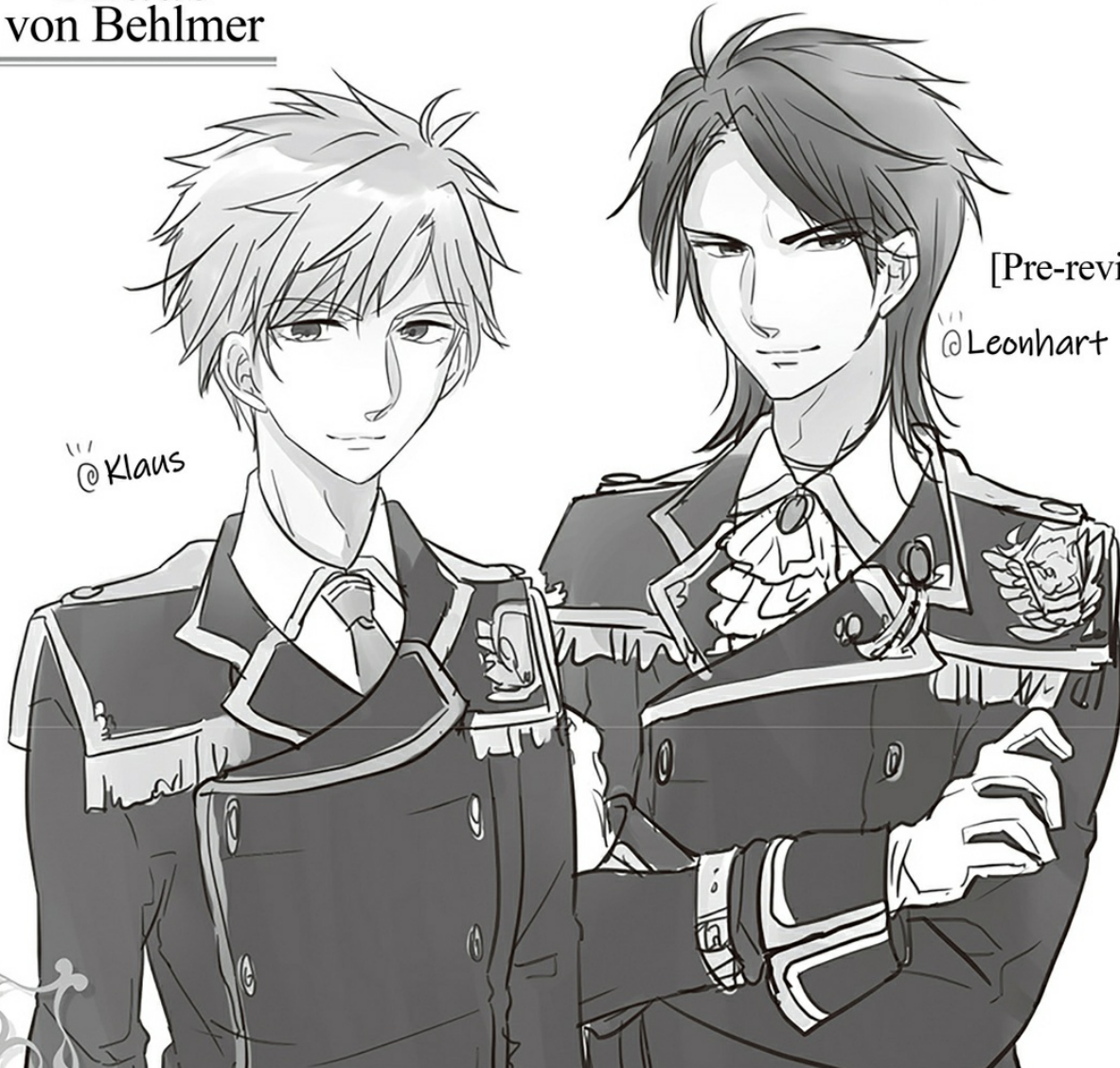


slits
on
both
sides

here
too



Klaus von Behlmer



[Pre-revision]

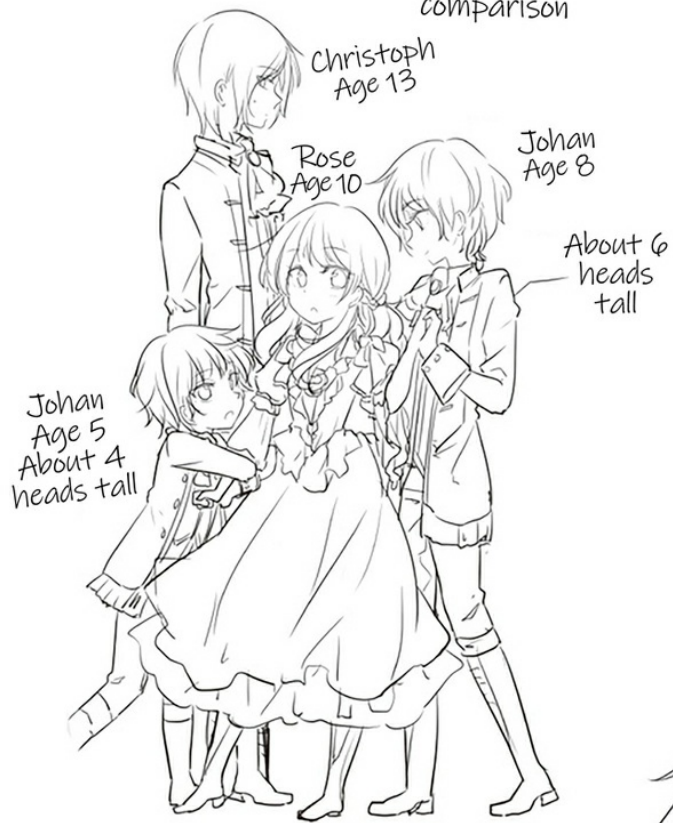
@Leonhart

@Klaus





@Height
comparison



Johan von Velfalt

age 8

age 5





Emma zu Eigel

Emma
and
George
(age 6)



@Full body
About
160cm?
6.5-7
heads
tall

@Full body
About
168cm
About 7
heads tall



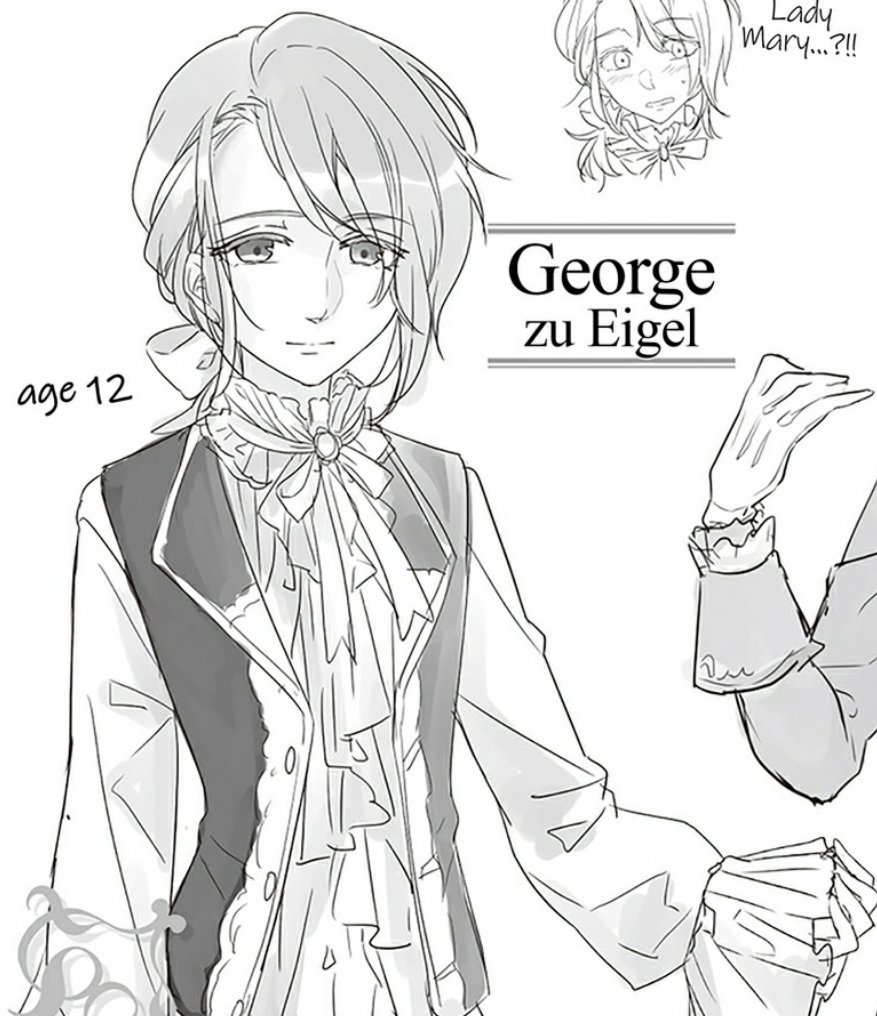
Christoph von Velfalt



Lady
Mary...?!!

George zu Eigel

age 12



age 13



@Height
comparison

Character Design



Lutz
165cm
About 7
heads tall

Teo
175cm
About 8
heads tall



Teo
Eilenberg

Lutz
Eilenberg





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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes:
Volume 1

by Bisu

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THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING STORY
ROUTES

Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

1